

“Learning to Accept that Foster Care Did Not Define Me”: The College-Going Experiences of
Black College Students with Foster Care Backgrounds

By

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DEDICATION

To all of my ancestors who made this possible, THANK YOU. None of this would have been possible without your strength, bravery, and wildest imaginations.

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First, without God, none of this would have been possible. God has continuously helped me through the trials and dark valleys, and He has helped me fear no evil as He has remained with me. I'm grateful to God for all the blessings and protections He has granted me.

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ELPA

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ABSTRACT

Higher education (i.e., colleges and universities) institutions must have a thorough understanding of the college-going process for potential students to be successful in their enrollment, retention, and graduation efforts. The college-going process often consists of deciding to pursue higher education, choosing an institution, and selecting a major. Although there is considerable information about the college-going and academic major choice processes for students within the majority, existing literature illuminates persistent obstacles for underrepresented students at the margins of higher education (Hines et al., 2019). More specifically, little is known about the college-going experiences of Black college students who were previously in foster care (Johnson, 2019). This qualitative study employs Chapman and colleagues' (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice and hermeneutic phenomenological approaches. Together these concepts not only emphasize "choice" but also consider student choices and experiences, contingent on cultural and racial aspects. In addition, the model and methodology interrogated the racial tensions that have historically been perpetuated toward Black and brown bodies in the child welfare and higher education system. It addresses the question, What factors do Black college students formerly in foster care consider when deciding to go to college, selecting an institution, and choosing an academic major? The findings of this study offer several contributions to various stakeholders (e.g., teachers, social workers, college admissions staff, faculty) and systems (e.g., child welfare, K-12, higher education institutions) in supplying implications and recommendations of practice to support degree-seeking Black foster care youth.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This dissertation explored the college-going experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds. More specifically, it examined the factors that influenced participants' decisions to enroll in higher education, select specific institutions (e.g., two/four-year, community colleges, PWIs, HBCUs), and choose specific academic majors. The following research questions guided this dissertation:

RQ1: Why do Black college students with foster care backgrounds pursue higher education?

RQ2: How do Black college students with foster care backgrounds make decisions and choices about which higher education institutions to attend?

RQ3: How do Black college students with foster care backgrounds make decisions about choosing of an academic major?

Chapman and associates' (2020) Conceptual Model of African American College Choice was used as the framework to understand participants' college-going decisions at the nexus of their various intersecting Black identities. Their model uses CRT and Yosso (2005) to draw on decisions based on race and various funds of knowledge. The findings draw attention to links with current literature, but they also add to our understanding of college-going experiences and Black college students who have experienced foster care.

Methods

This qualitative phenomenological study included 31 participants (e.g., 27 women and 4 men) from across the country. Through two semi-structured interviews and an artifact discussion, participants shared the various factors that influenced their college-going experiences. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 43, and with diverse experiences, spent from one to eighteen years in foster care across several different placement types (i.e., one to fifty different types of out-of-home placements).

Key Findings

The data demonstrate that a variety of factors (e.g., family—biological and adoptive, perceptions, support systems—teachers, lawyers, self-efficacy) influenced participants' college decisions. In addition, a range of capitals (e.g., familial, navigational, social, resistant, aspirational, linguistic) and artifacts were used to highlight the elements that influenced the participants' decisions to enroll in postsecondary education, select specific institutions, and choose particular academic programs and majors. In addition, this study advances a new understanding of *stability* (in a state of being balanced or with components of support) as it pertains to Black college students with foster care backgrounds.

Recommendations

Practice:

- Develop and implement more educational and career exploration opportunities for Black youth in out-of-home placement services
- Boost relationships, collaborations, and partnerships between K–12, child welfare, and higher education
- Further investigate how states might standardize out-of-home placement services and resources

Research:

- Investigate racial-ethnic identity development and connection to Blackness for Black college students formerly in foster care
- Continue to investigate factors that guide Black college students with foster care backgrounds toward specific academic majors not examined in this dissertation
- Delve into the connection Black students with foster care histories have with religion and spirituality and how it serves as a motivating and/or protective factor

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Higher education (i.e., colleges and universities) institutions must have a thorough understanding of the college-going process for potential students to succeed in their enrollment, retention, and graduation efforts. The college-going process often consists of deciding to pursue higher education, choosing an institution, and selecting a major. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022), there are a little less than 6,000 higher education institutions in the United States (U.S.). Although there is no all-encompassing list of available higher education majors, students frequently have a plethora of options to choose from. With so many institutions of higher education and academic majors to choose from, the college-going process can often be an exceedingly complex journey for prospective students.

Some studies have explored the influences and intricacies of college choice and academic major choice. For example, when it comes to college choice, a number of scholars have identified many significant factors that frequently influence students' decisions (e.g., aspirations, family involvement, location, aid sources, campus resources, race/ethnicity, institution perceptions & reputations, gender) (Freeman, 2005; Gross et al., 2020; Hossler & Gallagher, 1989; Hurtado et al., 1997; Lang et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2016; Perna, 2006; Squire & Mobley, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Regarding college students and their academic major choice, similar pertinent factors have been recognized. For instance, scholars have found students motivational beliefs (Wang, 2013), earlier exposure (Danner et al., 2017), gender (Zafar, 2013), passions (Brown et al., 2022), earning potential (Franklin et al., 2021), and race (Gabbidon et al., 2003) can all be catalysis for a student's academic major choice.

There is much information about the college-going and academic major choice processes for many students, and existing literature illuminates persistent obstacles for underrepresented students at the margins of higher education (Hines et al., 2019; Hurtado et al., 1997; Means et al.,

2016; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Despite the wide range of literature on college choice and academic major choice, little is known about the college-going experiences of Black college students who were previously in foster care. While their difficulties and obstacles have been extensively covered in the literature, their achievements tend to go under-acknowledged and under-examined.

Relatively little is known about the foster care system and the people who go through it, particularly those who age out and pursue higher education. Even less is known about college-bound and/or college-going individuals who identify as Black or African American and have had foster care experiences (Amechi et al., 2020; Lane, 2020; Johnson, 2019; Whitman, 2022). Although 70-84% of foster care youth have college aspirations, only about 20% enroll and between 1-11% complete college degrees (Johnson, 2019). For those who do make the journey to higher education, considerable research is needed to gain insight into their institutional and academic major choices because currently, there is a considerable gap between college aspirations and understanding college-going. That is, why do Black college students formerly in foster care decide to attend higher education institutions, select specific institutions and majors? While some institutions have begun to put in support systems and practices for assisting this population of students, other institutions of higher education continue to fall short. In turn, support programs, or the lack of them, may influence former foster youth's overall higher education access, which could have a long-term impact on their college choice and academic major decision-making. Further research is needed to identify the influential aspects that affect this understudied population's educational choices and selections.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, access to higher education, financial resources, and the knowledge of the educational system were prerequisites for deciding to pursue higher education (Chapman et al.,

2020). Such access and choice were largely provided to white, financially stable families. Higher education for African Americans and Black people originated from a combination of extremely challenging conditions (e.g., denied access, segregation/limitations) (Chapman et al., 2020; Freeman, 2005; Zamani, 2003). The founding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the GI Bill, various policies and legislation (e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 10925), court decisions (e.g., Brown v. Board of Education), and Pell Grants have all influenced how higher education becomes a possibility for Black and Brown people (Allen, 1992; Chapman et al., 2020; Thelin, 2004). African American and Black students are still currently subjected to experiences of marginalization when deciding to enroll in higher education and choosing an institution and an academic major. Some of these patterns of marginalization exist across multiple domains, including employment instability, financial instability, housing instability, systemic inequities, and familial challenges (Alexander & West, 2020; Roberts, 2022; Wilkerson, 2020). Systemic oppression continues to cause harm and exclude numerous groups of people.

In the U.S., 83% of adults have little or no knowledge about the foster care system (Johnson, 2019). Over the last eleven years, the number of youths who have spent time in foster care has remained above 600,000 (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 2022). Roughly 20,000 youth age out of or become emancipated from the foster care system each year (AFCARS, 2022; Amechi et al., 2020; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021). The majority of youth are left with nowhere to go and little assistance or resources to rely on. While the overall high number of children designated as wards of the state is disturbing, what is more concerning is that Black youth are continually overrepresented within the foster care population (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 1997; Rymph, 2017). Compared to other parental groups, Black parents' rights are more frequently revoked, and Black children are less likely to be adopted (Cooper,

2013; Roberts, 2022). A large corpus of research on Black individuals with foster care histories centers on deficits (e.g., homelessness, mental health, substance abuse, unemployment, and educational barriers), but little is known about this demographic in more positive outcomes, for example, their college-going processes.

Black college students formerly in foster care experience unparalleled barriers to higher education access, matriculation, and graduation compared to other populations (i.e., non-fostered peers, and white peers) (Amechi et al., 2020; Lane, 2020; Whitman, 2018). While some states (e.g., Arizona, California, Minnesota) have educational resources to help former foster care youth pursue higher education, more assistance support programs are needed to address the high number of students in the U.S. foster care system who have higher education aspirations (Johnson, 2019). Little remains known about college students who aged out (i.e., emancipate) of foster care and how they choose a specific college and select a major. This phenomenological study examined Black college students formerly in foster care and their experiences with the college-going process (i.e., deciding to attend extended education, college choice and academic major choice). This study with Black college students formerly in foster care is threefold: (a) to provide new insights into improving this understudied population's educational and career outcomes; (b) to better understand their college choice and academic major choice processes; and (c) to discover and offer results that provide promising practices and policies that strengthen the college enrollment, achievement, and retention of Black college students formerly in foster care. This study offers a strengths-based approach (i.e., an exploration of how individuals from various marginalized backgrounds manage to overcome severe adversities) that overshadows deficit models (i.e., an examination of marginalized populations' restrictions) often used to explain the lived-experiences of this vulnerable population of students.

My work background in higher education and foster care services has positioned me at the nexus of this study. I was frequently the only Black male in many of the youth social services/patient care professions for which I have worked. My experiences encouraged my research parameters around race and the variegated experiences of Black folks. My experiences in higher education and foster care services have assisted me in recognizing the complexities that come with attempting to understand both of these worlds with multiple identities. Separately and together, these two systems frequently deliver injustice and impose obstacles that remain, and very few have started to enact reform or dismantlement to assist Black youth and young adults who want to pursue higher education. Moreover, both the higher education system and the foster care system have historically and currently continued to inflict various forms of trauma on Black and brown bodies. As a Black man who has gone through the college-going process multiple times and has observed others go through the same process, more has to be done to understand this multiplex journey and to benefit future generations. This study aimed to make sense of and improve the college-going experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study examined the college-going experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds. I seek to gain in-depth knowledge specific to Black former foster care youth and explore the factors contributing to their college-going pathways. To better understand the experiences of this understudied population, the following research questions guided this dissertation study:

RQ1: Why do Black college students with foster care backgrounds pursue higher education?

RQ2: How do Black college students with foster care backgrounds make decisions and choices about which higher education institutions to attend?

RG3: How do Black college students with foster care backgrounds make decisions about choosing of an academic major?

Significance of the Study

This dissertation study acts as a catalyst for further exploration into the phenomena of decisions to go to college, institutional choice and academic major choice for Black individuals with foster care experiences who have educational aspirations. The study uplifts and celebrates the persistence and tenacity of this understudied population. Moreover, this dissertation study not only combats the oppressive history of the foster care and education systems but also provides new insight and hope for future generations of Black college-going students formerly in foster care.

The coming generations of Black college students with foster care backgrounds with educational ambitions will suffer as a result of the stolen and absent Black voices in asset-based literature, a lack of institutional/program-specific focus on them, and a lack of real-time knowledge about what happens to these students and their college process.

The findings of this study offer several contributions to various stakeholders (e.g., teachers, social workers, college admissions staff, faculty) and systems (e.g., child welfare, K-12, higher education institutions) in supplying recommendations of practice to support former foster care youth with higher education enrollment, institutional choice and academic major choice. Foster care youth advocates will be able to help this understudied population if they are better informed about the college-going processes. Black college students formerly in foster care are bold and persistent in their abilities to traverse multiple systems. More information is needed now to help them continue to thrive in their educational journeys. Specifically, more has to be known about the realities of Black bodies, who continue to be overly placed in oppressive, money-oriented institutionalized systems (i.e., child welfare, foster care, prison) based on

slavery-driven ideologies and white-dominated higher education structures (Alexander & West, 2020; Roberts, 2022). This study examines how Black college students who have been in the foster care system navigate their college-going experience in quest of stability.

Explanation of Key Terms

The key terms of this dissertation study are described using a wide variety of both formal and informal words. The following key terms will be defined and used throughout the duration of the study proposal: higher education, institutional choice, academic major choice, Black, foster care, foster care youth, and emancipation.

Higher Education: An educational environment where students engage in a focused academic curriculum in a college or university setting (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

College-Going: Students thinking about their higher education options after high school (McDonough, 1997).

College Choice: According to Hossler and colleagues (1989), the term "college choice" is "a complex, multistage, process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (p 234). This study also used institutional choice to capture all types of higher education schools (e.g., colleges, universities).

Academic Major choice: Distinguishes where students will take the majority of their courses within an institution, shaping a significant portion of their relationships with faculty and peers, as well as outlining potential future career pathways (Porter & Umbach, 2006).

College Going Process: As stated in Freeman (2005), the term "college choice process" is "the decision to participate in higher education, the search for the institution, and the selection of an institution" (p. xix). In this dissertation, I use the term "college-going process" to capture students' decisions to pursue higher education, choose an institution, and select a major.

Black: A person with ancestry from Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). African Americans may also be used to denote Black persons born within the United States. Further, African Americans can be Black, but all Black individuals are not African American. Although African American may be used when referencing the empirical literature or the work of other researchers, I primarily utilize Black in this dissertation. The participant demographic table also includes information on how participants self-identified.

Foster Care: Foster care is when children and/or adolescents are removed from the custody of their biological parents and or guardians' homes by child welfare services and placed in various temporary living arrangements overseen by the state. Youth can be removed from their homes and placed in state-governed placements for short-term and long-term periods of time (Cooper, 2013).

Foster Care Youth: A minor (i.e., any child or adolescent under the age of 18) who is removed from their primary residence for a multitude of reasons (e.g., parent(s) death, parent(s) imprisonment, abuse, neglect, maltreatment) and relocated to a variety of alternative living situations/placements: group homes, kinship care (i.e., placed with relatives), residential facility, pre-adoptive homes, respite, adopted homes, therapeutic-treatment facility (Quijada-Banks, 2020).

Emancipation: The process that fostered youth go through as they 'age out' of the system (i.e., youth that are not adopted). In other words, when a child turns 18 years old (some states have extended this age to 21) and their access to foster youth/child welfare governmental services is revoked and the youth must become independent (Batsche et al., 2012).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review was constructed around identifying current scholarship that explores: (1) why students decide to go to college, (2) why students choose specific institutions, (3) how college students choose their academic disciplines, (4) the history of the U.S. foster care system, and (5) the college-going process of Black students who were previously in foster care. This literature review comprises sources from a variety of academic fields. For instance, this dissertation's objective was supported by using research from the fields of psychology, gender studies, social work, and education (i.e., K–12 and higher education). Drawing materials from several fields allowed for a more comprehensive, in-depth look at the experiences of the understudied population this dissertation seeks to further understand. My literature search was extensive and wide-ranging in order to better comprehend institutional choice and academic major choice. Also, because there is little educational research on the experiences of youth who were previously in foster care, particularly those who identify as Black and/or African American, other disciplines of scholarship were utilized as supplementary sources. The literature review's scope was not in any way constrained. I did not limit my data search to a specific time period because it was important to stress the historical context that has frequently perpetuated Black families and their children. A variety of electronic databases (e.g., ProQuest, Google Scholar, Connected Papers) were used to identify relevant sources, which were then summarized and synthesized to assemble the literature review. Institutional research engine databases were also leveraged which gave me access to additional resources such as Project Muse, JSTOR, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PubMed. Several key terms and phrases were used to detect data sources (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Literature Review Key Terms and Phrases

Foster Care Youth	College/Institutional Choice	Academic Major Choice
history of child welfare	“college choice” AND “influences”	“academic major choice” AND “college students”
“child welfare” AND “race”	“college choice” AND “factors”	“college major” AND “influences”
“Black” AND “child welfare”	“college choice” AND “race”	“major selection” AND “race”
“African American” AND “child welfare”	“college choice” And “gender”	“academic choice” AND “gender”
History of foster care	“college choice” AND “ students” or “high school students” or “college students”	“major choice” AND “students” or “high school students” or “college students”
“foster care” AND “Black”	“college choice” AND “ Black students” or “African American”	“academic major choice” AND “Black students” or “African American”
“foster care” AND “African American”	“college choice” AND “HBCU” or “PWI” or “community college”	“selecting a major” AND “postsecondary education” or higher education”
“foster care” AND “girls” or “females” or “women”	“college choice” AND “foster youth”	“deciding on a major” AND “college students”
“foster care” AND “boys” or “males” or “male” or “men”	“college choice” AND “girls” or “females” or “women”	“academic major choice” AND “girls” or “females” or “women”
“foster care youth” AND “postsecondary education” or “higher education” or “college”	“college choice” AND “boys” or “males” or “male” or “men”	“academic major choice” AND “boys” or “males” or “male” or “men”

* The table contains some key terms and phrases and is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

Throughout my literature search, I found peer-reviewed empirical papers, books, book chapters, news articles, law reports/ briefs, and dissertations. All the aforementioned data sources were used and taken into consideration during the literature analysis due to the scarcity of higher education research on Black college students who had previously been in foster care. The following review of literature offers an outline aimed at understanding the college-going experiences (i.e., college choice and academic major choice) of Black college students who were formerly in foster care. Seven significant areas of literature are outlined and described below: college choice, academic major choice, foster care history, Black youth in foster care,

educational support for college-going foster youth, college students who have experienced foster care, and Black college students who have experienced foster care.

College Choice

The college choice process is complex and has been theorized in terms of student characteristics, internal and external environments, and life stages. In the research literature, college choice is frequently described through assorted models and conceptual frameworks (Cabrera & Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Chapman et al., 2020; Freeman, 2005; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Perna, 2006; Somers et al., 2006). Chapman's (1981) college choice conceptual model asserts higher education decisions are based on student characteristics (e.g., high school performance, attitude, educational aspirations, socioeconomic status) interconnected with external influences. Chapman declares the external factors to be situated within three category types: 1) significant persons (e.g., friends, parents, high school personnel), 2) fixed institution characteristics (e.g., cost, possible aid, location, programs offered), and 3) institutional efforts to communicate with potential students (e.g., written communication, campus visits/tours, additional recruitment tactics). Between student characteristics and external factors, a general expectation of college life is advanced. The student's choice of the institution and the institution's choice of the student work together to outline college choice.

According to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice, students move through three decision-making phases over time: 1) predisposition, 2) search, and 3) choice. In phase one (predisposition), students reflect on their educational and career-based aspirations to determine if they want to pursue higher education or not. In phase two (search), students interested in furthering their education after high school begin seeking out information about institutions and how many they could apply to. In phase three (choice), students begin the

process of envisioning their institutional options and refining their decisions to a select number of schools for admission. Hossler and colleagues (1999) outline that students move through these varying stages at different times, beginning in or around the 7th grade. They claim that (a) predisposition—typically manifests between grades 7th and 10th, (b) search—occurs during grades 10th and 12th, and (c) choice—happens in grades 11th and 12th. As students progress through the three stages, they ultimately shape their college choices.

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice provides some aspects that the other two models do not. Perna's (2006) conceptual model draws on Becker's (1962; 1993) concept of human capital, in which individuals invest in themselves for future potential returns. For instance, students choose to pursue higher education in order to improve their future opportunities (e.g., income, career options). Furthermore, Perna (2006) emphasizes that factors such as race and socioeconomic status influence who has access to and chooses which institutions of higher education to attend, and that educational attainment is not universal. In Perna's (2006) model, a student's college choice is framed around four contextual layers: 1) habitus, 2) school and community, 3) higher education, and 4) social, economic, and policy. In layer one (habitus), students draw from their different forms of capital (e.g., social, cultural), and self-perspectives (e.g., race, gender, SES). Layer two (school & community), unpacks how a student's educational and environmental settings have some influence on their college choices. In layer three (higher education), the lure (e.g., location, marketing, resources) of the university and its connection to the student's personal values is explored at the intersection of the student's college choice. Finally, in layer four (social, economic, and policy), a student's decision about which college to attend could be influenced by events taking place in a wider context, including

but not limited to changes in the country's population, employment/unemployment rates, and modifications made to offered and/or available grants.

While numerous models and conceptual frameworks of college choice exist, many often lack the examination of race or ethnicity as a key factor in college choice. To this extent, some scholars have formulated models that center on race, racism, and racialized societal structures that often highlight influential factors which steer Black college students to access and/or barriers for their college choice process (Chapman, 2020; Freeman, 2006; McDonough et al, 1997). In accordance with Chapman et al. (2020) and Fetterman (2023), Black students choose higher education institutions through a more involved decision-making process compared to their non-Black peers. For instance, the decision-making process for 26,907 students (19,260 African American students and 7,647 African American students at HBCUs) choosing between attending an HBCU or PWI was analyzed in a quantitative study by McDonough and associates in 1997. Using an analytic model, their findings highlighted results from descriptive and regression analysis of the choice process and expectations of their two student samples. McDonough and colleagues used the Cooperative Institutional Research Programs first-year student survey, which asked questions about student's background and demographics, high school experiences, reasons for pursuing higher education, factors that led them to choose a particular institution, and expectations for college. The McDonough and affiliates model provided insight into Black students' choices to attend HBCUs or PWIs.

Freeman's (2005) model calls attention to and expands Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice. In her rendition of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice, Freeman reconstructs stage 1 from 'predisposition' into 'predetermination'. According to Freeman, a college choice model must include external factors that students have no control over.

For example, a student's cultural traits should be taken into account while making college decision-making choices. The Freeman (2005) model expands on how a student's college choice is influenced by factors such as family, kinship (e.g., extended family), and school characteristics (e.g., school and curriculum). The findings of McDonough et al. (1997) indicating race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status have an impact on college choice provided additional reinforcement for the need of Freeman's model (Freeman, 2005, Lowry, 2017). Freeman's (2005) model of predetermination was developed through sixteen group interviews with seventy African American students with higher education aspirations; 10th-12th graders in schools (public and private) in four African American-majority cities (Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York). Although this model helps to understand how Black college-bound adolescents choose their higher education institutions, it only captures (i.e. predetermination) one stage of a multi-stage decision-making process.

More recently, Chapman and colleagues (2020) developed a newer conceptual model of African American college choice and agency. It was structured from their research on 718 college transitioning high-achieving African American student survey responses and 74 interviews, previous research on the college choice process and critical race theory (CRT) a new model was established. CRT is centered as a methodical lens to acknowledge the societal, political, and historical factors that affect college-going African American students' higher education choices. Chapman et al., (2020) make use of the three stages of the college choice procedure proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) in their explanation. Furthermore, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) premise is used to support Black students' diverse forms of capital while deciding which institutions of higher education to attend.

Using the aforementioned frameworks and others, research has highlighted that a student's college choice is affected by a variety of influential factors (e.g., parent/family involvement, K-12 experiences, geographical location, financial aid, educational motivation, campus resources, race/ethnicity, institution perceptions & reputations, gender, campus accessibility, inclusiveness) (Bergerson, 2009; Chapman et al., 2020; Freeman, 2005; Gross et al., 2020; Hossler & Gallagher, 1989; Hurtado et al., 1997; Johnson & McGowan, 2017; McDonough et al., 1997; Murray et al., 2016; Perna, 2006; Squire & Mobley, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). College choice is typically influenced by a number of these influential factors rather than just one. Such influential factors can be recognized in a student's college choice process across various higher education institutional types (e.g., community colleges, HBCUs, PWIs). In light of this knowledge, the selection of an institution can be a challenging and multiplex procedure. Beyond this, students of color—especially those who identify as Black—often find the process of selecting a college to be more multilayered than their white counterparts (Freeman, 2005; McDonough et al., 1997). This section describes the many layers and intricacies of influence in college choice decisions for Black youth, including family, socioeconomic status and financial aid, institutional characteristics, and social identities.

Family and College Choice Influences

Black students' decisions to further their education and where they attend school are often influenced by their families (Butner et al., 2001; Chapman et al., 2018; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Lowry, 2017; McDonough et al., 1997; Perna, 2006; Tobolowsky et al., 2005). In most cases, families desire higher educational outcomes for their family members in the hopes that they would receive a better education and substantive life outcomes (e.g., obtain a higher education degree, career opportunities, finances; Freeman, 2005; Pierre-Louis, 2022; Smith, 2008; Squire & Mobley,

2015). Black college students are regularly predisposed by their parents, siblings, and other extended family and/or family members when deciding and selecting an institution to attend. For example, Clayton and colleagues' (2023) study of 24 first-year Black college students (15 women & nine men) revealed that family was a significant factor in participants' decisions to attend both HBCUs and PWIs. Participants discussed how factors such as their families (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family), alum status (see similar findings in Patitu, 2000), or advice to be accepting of a more diverse student body helped them choose between attending an HBCU or a PWI. Alike, Lowry (2017) researched the college choice process of nineteen Black community college students (14 women and five men). Her research showed that participants' decisions about institutions were influenced by their parents, siblings, and extended family members' community college experiences. The gravity of the educational commitments participants made to deceased family members and friends was highlighted in Winkle-Wagner's (2010) study on twenty-eight first-generation Black women and college choice. Participants vowed to their loved ones that they would enroll in college and graduate. Collectively, these studies indicate that Black students' college choices are often influenced by their families.

Financial Aid in College Choice

Financial aid is widely cited in research as a highly influential aspect of the college choice process of Black college students (Cartledge et al., 2015; Comeaux et al., 2020; Freeman, 1999; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Johnson, 2017; McDonough et al., 1997; Patitu, 2000; Squire & Mobley, 2015; St. John et al., 2005; Wood & Harrison, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Moreover, the types of financial aid provided are crucial, as some students resort to taking out loans, leading to debt accumulation and challenges with repayment upon dropping out or completing their degrees (Fox et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). Financial aid, especially for Black students, has a measurable influence on a range of higher education likelihoods, including

but not limited to access, matriculation, and graduation. For example, Comeaux and associates (2020) research on 74 Black students (56 women and 18 men) attending various institutions (8-Ivy Leagues, 12-highly selective PWI's, 11-HBCUs, 13- moderately selective PWIs, 25-California State Universities, 5-community colleges) predicated that appealing financial aid packages helped in their considerations and final institution choices. Although they had been accepted to a specific California university, the students all chose to enroll elsewhere for a variety of reasons, including the financial alternatives (i.e., debt-averse) that their chosen schools provided. Too, Griffin et al. (2012) notes funding options (e.g., scholarships) were a college choice factor for Black immigrant students. The twenty-three participants (18 women and 5 men) from a diverse range of nations noted that the financial resources made available by various institutions aided their enrollment decisions. Their findings were similar to those found in Wood and Harrison's (2014) quantitative research on 77,791 Black males at community colleges. Assessing the cost and accessibility of institutional funding in the form of grants, fellowships, scholarships (academic and/or athletic), and financial assistance (i.e., loans) continues to determine how Black college students choose their colleges. As is evident in the research, financial assistance for higher education opportunities is frequently centered at the forefront of college choice for Black students.

Institutional Location and College Choice

When it comes to higher education choices, Black college students often consider the geographic locations of their respective institutions (Clayton et al., 2023; Pierre-Louis, 2022; Strayhorn et al., 2008; Wood & Harris, 2015). Students commonly base their college choices on an institution's location in relation to how close or how far away it is to places, people, and the communities they know. For example, Pierre-Louis's (2022) study of ten Haitian immigrant students (6 women and 4 men) who had lived in the U.S. for at least two years revealed that an

institution's location in association with family was perceived in two distinct ways. The first is that college athletes wanted to stay close to their loved ones so they could see them compete without any issues. Such evidence can also be gathered in other empirical works (Crowley, 2004; Boyer, 2016). Conversely, due to strained relationships, other participants desired to be further away from their families. Similarly, these two perspectives on locations were also concluded by Strayhorn et al. (2008) research of seven gay Black undergraduate males. In their study, some of the participants opted to attend an institution close to their family, whereas others selected institutions further away so they could come out and not feel the burdens of their families. Although research reveals students view institutional location differently, it still plays a significant role in how Black college students think about their college choices.

Race, Resources, and Campus Characteristics in College Choice

Some Black students' enrollment selections are influenced by their race, the resources offered on campus, and other characteristics (e.g., programs offered, campus reputation, and environment of the university). Researchers emphasize that for Black college-bound students, race often influences their college choice (Freeman, 1999; Johnson, 2019; Slay, 2017; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Students who select to attend HBCUs often highlight their race, and the sense of belonging offered by these institutions. For example, Smith et al. (2015) findings suggested that four Black college students with foster care backgrounds (two women and two men) decided to attend an HBCU because of its cultural and communal landscape. Comparably, Johnson's (2018) study of 51 HBCU alumni from 20 different schools supported the idea that participants' college selections were affected by their yearning to be with other Black students and avoid being forced into perpetual racial battle fatigue by attending a PWI. In other cases, some Black students desire more diverse experiences comparable to those they had in high school or more exposure to larger and more diverse student bodies away from their racial identities. Similar

results can be found in other scholarly studies (Clayton et al., 2023; Squire & Mobley, 2015). some students chose institutions based on a broader sense of safety. Goings and Sewells (2019) research on the college choice process of seventeen Black adults (10 men and 7 women), who were formally identified as gifted as children in NYC Public schools, concluded that their comfort level was important in their overall higher education decisions. Comfortability in the sense of safe places where they can be free intellectually and socially. Similar findings were also discovered by other empirically supported inquiries (Squire & Mobley, 2015; Thompson et al., 2019). As the formative research states, race is sometimes a significant factor in college choice.

Both the institutional traits and the resources/support systems provided by the institution assist in shaping the particular college students choose to attend. Studies have shown how college prep programs (e.g., dual enrollment, trio programs) have influenced students' choice of higher education institutions. Winkle-Wagner's (2010) findings draw on how Black college-bound women made their selections of institutions based on their participation in trio programs affiliated with those campuses. Similar outcomes were represented in Hines et al.'s (2020) study findings. Three first-generation Black male college students from a mid-sized PWI were interviewed for the study, and they discussed how being a part of the institution's minority male initiative program and participating in extracurricular activities influenced their decision to enroll. Throughout the studies, students emphasized how their ties to the institutions, familiarity with the campus, and support systems helped them decide in their college choice process. In a similar vein, Amechi and colleagues' (2020) qualitative study of seven Black college students with foster care backgrounds (4 women and 3 men) upholds how students choose to attend an HBCU because of their foster care assistance program. The university's president and other partners supported the program which made the students feel welcomed. Such college prep and

campus support programs are critical not just for students to see when considering which institutions to attend but also for students' retention during their academic journeys.

Students' college choice decisions have also been shown to be influenced by a university's reputation across a variety of axes (e.g., national rank, academic, social, degree programs offered, athletics). Many studies on Black students' college choices have found that an institution's reputation is a significant deciding factor (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Johnson, 2018, McDonough et al., 1997; Tobolowsky et al., 2005; Sevier, 1992; Wood & Harris, 2015). According to Patitu's (2000) study of 185 Black male undergraduate and graduate students, the institution's reputation had a role in their decision-making. Participants acknowledged not only the institution's positive reputation as a whole but also the reputation of some of the institution's specific colleges and/or programs that they saw themselves being a part of when making their higher education selections. According to Tobolowsky and colleagues' (2005) research, Black students, Black parents, and counselors gave priority to an institution's academic prestigious reputation when choosing which campuses to apply to. Similar findings were presented in Wood and Harris's (2015) study, which looked at the college choices of Black and Latino male community college students. The participants decided on attending a particular institution based on its academic reputation. Whereas Braddock & Hua's (2006) work highlighted how Black high school seniors made their college choices on the premise of not only the institution's academic, career, and economic, demographic factors but also the social and athletic reputation held by their intuitions. Students' decisions regarding which colleges to attend are still affected by an assortment of factors, including their diverse sources of capital and general expectations for the institutions they are drawn to.

Many factors influence college students' decisions to enroll in particular institutions. Their priorities and varying circumstances are frequently mirrored in their decisions. This could be due to a variety of circumstances but not limited to including their family, accessible aid, locality, race, and additional campus resources. Such considerations may be crucial when determining where to apply and attend for Black college students with foster care experiences.

Academic Major Choice

In college, discipline major selection and career pathways research, Lent and colleagues' (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has often been used to make sense of student's individual academic and professional choice decisions. Lent et al.'s (1994) SCCT framework extends Banduras' (1986) work (i.e., general social theory) by exploring three separate but interlinked models of an individual's career development: (a) interest development model, (b) choice-making model, and (c) performance and persistence in educational and career model. According to SCCT, an individual's learning experiences give rise to their interests. SCCT has been used to explore the experiences of Black males in graduate engineering programs (Burt et al., 2023), Native undergraduate students (Dabdoub et al., 2023), female foster care youth (Williams et al., 2018), and African immigrant students (Wambu et al., 2017). The SCCT framework suggests that individuals are fueled by internal (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation) and external factors (e.g., environment, family), which help drive their choices toward certain goals and development opportunities, constructed around three cognitive premises: (a) self-efficacy, (b) outcome expectations, and (c) personal goals. These three premises have been documented and researched to contain strong correlations with academic major choice, and career pathways.

The choice of an academic major can potentially affect a student's college experience, learning processes, and career trajectories after degree completion (Denice, 2021; Porter & Umbach, 2006). The process of choosing an academic major is often influenced by both internal

and external factors. A student's decision to pursue a particular major has been motivated by a variety of factors, including but not limited to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1984; Strayhorn, 2015; Wang, 2013), passion/interest (Brown et al., 2022; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Thomas, 1985), early exposure (Charleston, 2012; Fries-Britt et al., 2013; Workman, 2015), community advocacy (Page-Reeves et al., 2019; Rincón & Rodriguez, 2021; Vincent et al., 2012), safeguards (Forbes, 2020; Ganely et al., 2018; Layton et al., 2003), earning potential (Franklin et al., 2021; Quadlin, 2020; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015), race (Letterman et al., 2018; Maple & Stage, 1991; Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003), and gender (Beutel et al., 2018, 2019; Ware & Lee, 1988; Zafar, 2013). These influential factors are consistent throughout the aforementioned studies; hence, a student's academic major choice cannot be subjected to one entity. Also, a combination of these factors has helped students persist with their academic major choice or transition to other majors that better reflect their ideals and various experiences (Brown et al., 2022). The majority of the academic research on major choice focuses on students' experiences in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), but other studies on academic major choice have comparable results. Although various factors influence a college student's choice of an academic major, this literature review focused on gender, race, and early exposure.

Gender Identity and Academic Major Choice

A student's gender identity sometimes has an influence on their academic major choice. For some, the college academic major choice process begins at a young age and is often influenced by a student's preparation. Women and men often have different educational experiences and/or preparation pathways, especially those that are students of color (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2020; McGee & Pearman, 2014; Storlie et al., 2017). Students may view their college majors as primarily intellectual choices, career decisions, or a combination of the two, according to Mullen (2014). The literature identifies a few factors that men and women consider

while choosing their academic majors and career pathways. Scholars assert that institutional context may influence how women and men select and preserve college majors (Hamilton, 2014; Mullen, 2014). Mullen's (2014) study explored the experiences of privileged students (i.e., white, high income social backgrounds) at a highly selective liberal arts institution, where she documented those women based their academic major choice on interest and enjoyment. Alternatively, men selected majors based on financial gain and the reputability of future family elitism (see similar outcomes in Zafar, 2013). Women's academic major choice processes are sometimes shaped by their thoughts on future household elements.

According to Wiswall and Zafar's (2021) study of 493 students (317 women and 176 men), women's decisions to major in a certain field and complete their degrees were influenced by potential family factors like marriage, spousal income and fertility (also documented in Barrett et al., 2022; Blakemore & Low, 1984). Wright et al. (2021) examined the college major choices of first-generation students and continuing-education students across both groups and genders. Their findings showed that both men and women first-generation students were more prone to selecting "applied" majors over "academic" majors. Moreover, first-generation women chose more female-dominated fields compared to their continuing-education peers. In another instance, the results of a study by Quadlin (2020) utilizing survey data from 2,639 first-year students revealed gender differences in academic major choices: men chose majors that reflected high earning potential, and women selected majors that were human-centered and helping-focused (see also Montmarquette et al., 2002; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015), unless they are from lower SES background families (Ma, 2009). As the studies have shown, there are some trends in the differences of academic major choice between women and men, perhaps informed by established social standards and gatekeeping. Yet, a better understanding of why some majors are

chosen based on gender identity is crucial for implementing pedagogical strategies that may successfully reduce the gender gap in major and career exploration. Future research should inquire about gender differences in college choice and academic major choice among Black college students who have previously been in foster care.

Race and Academic Major Choice

Students frequently consider their own race and ethnicity when deciding on a college major or career trajectory (Dickson, 2010; Letterman et al., 2018; St. John et al., 2004; Thomas, 1985; Vincent et al., 2012). Many differences have been documented in the mapping of students of color racial backgrounds to their academic major choices. For example, Daly (2005) found that students of color (i.e., African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Indigenouness) tended to place greater significance on advice from advisors and professors than white students in his quantitative study that examined differences in the motivations for choosing college degrees (i.e., accounting, marketing, and management). According to Letterman et al.'s (2018) research, Black men who earn bachelor's degrees tend to select majors that pay less than their white male peers. Moreover, Black female bachelor's degree holders are starting to select more lucrative majors than their non-Black female counterparts. Within various racial student groups, differing influences were identified in two studies on students seeking degrees in criminal justice. Both Tartaro and Krimmel's (2003) survey of 400 students from seven states attending 12 four-year colleges and universities and Gabbidon et al.'s (2003) study of 284 undergraduate students from five HBCUs found that Black and white students chose to pursue criminal justice for varying reasons. The key difference was that Black students wanted to combat oppression, help people, receive economic gains, had less family influence, and were less interested in police-related employment, whereas white students wanted to preserve the constitution, join the police force, and had family influence. Despite having higher intentions to complete STEM degrees, students

of color are less likely to graduate than their white counterparts (Danner et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020). In their 2015 study, Russell and Russell examined four Black women who switched their initial majors after encountering difficulties pursuing STEM degrees at a PWI. Their findings were corroborated by the Black women's experiences at the PWI, which included criticism of early academic success in institutional courses, poor career counseling /advice (also see McCoy et al., 2017), and perceptions of inadequate science and mathematics preparation prior to entering post-secondary education.

Early Exposure and Academic Major Choice

Numerous types of early exposure experiences can cultivate a students' academic major choice. Through various forms of capital (e.g., parents, family, dual enrollment, trio programs, mentors/role models, high school experiences, environments), students often learn about institutions of higher education and certain fields of study. Danner and associates (2017) explain how pre-college programs such as *Reach One Each One Program* (ROEO) are instrumental in helping students to decide what majors to choose in higher education. In their study, 26 African American students (23 women and 3 men) and one white female student asserted that their participation in ROEO during high school influenced their thoughts to pursue health-related science majors. Some other programs (e.g., TRiO programs, undergraduate research experiences) like Meyerhoff Scholars, Ronald E. McNair, Millennium Scholars, Upward Bound, and Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP), have historically aided underrecognized students in certain academic majors and their overall persistence in higher education (Burt et al., 2019). In comparison, Wang's (2013) quantitative analysis of 6,300 diverse students suggests that exposure to and experiences with early math and science curricula (i.e., high school) frequently assists students' decisions to pursue STEM majors (find similar findings in students early exposure see Burt et al., 2023; Burt & Johnson, 2018). Likewise, Hunter and Meshkati's (2022)

study of first-generation ($n = 114$) and continuing-generation ($n = 175$) students in psychology at a midsize institution in the mid-Atlantic region found that both groups exhibited a general interest in the major, but first-generation students had a greater proportion of exposure to the subject in their high school experiences. Parallel findings were found in two studies examining students' influences in selecting to pursue degrees in computer science. Barrett and colleagues (2022) work on 19 students (10 women and 9 men), and Charleston's (2012) study of 37 African American students across varying levels of academic classification (i.e., bachelors, masters, doctoral) all had different forms of early exposure to computers (e.g., computer access in the home and/or in school, interacting with people in the field). Students in social work sometimes choose their degree pursuits based on their experiences of adversity. For instance, Rompf and Royse (1994) found that out of 243 undergraduates across five different institutions, students decided to pursue undergraduate degrees in social work after witnessing/and or being exposed to psychosocial trauma experiences in their families while growing up. Lee and an associate's study of 85 social work students from 2021 found similar results. In their research, adverse life experiences were a factor in their academic major choice across the three separate groups of students (i.e., 28 newly admitted, 30 enrolled in beginning courses, and 27 in the last courses before internship placements) that participated in their project. Other choice factors were based on students' religious beliefs. Spirituality and a desire to serve others were also discovered in Hirsbrunner et al.'s (2012) study of 70 undergraduate students in social work programs, as well as Rompf and Royse's (1994) study.

Like college choice, academic major choice is frequently influenced by a number of circumstances that students may have encountered both before and during their time at their prospective institutions of higher learning. While some students use their experiences to

determine their majors early, others frequently switch their majors or begin their postsecondary higher education journeys as undecided. Further, a student's choice of major frequently has important implications for their career choices and pathways. According to a summary of the literature, this dissertation study will add to our understanding of how and why Black college students from foster care backgrounds choose their majors.

Foster Care History

To better understand the college-going and major-choosing processes of former foster care adolescents, some historical context of the United States foster care system is required. Understanding the historical background of Black families within the foster care system will help inform how Black former foster care students negotiate the college-going and major choosing processes.

In the larger context of the foster care system, it is first necessary to explore its origin in the context of American history. Children and young adolescents have been left in the care of people who are not their biological parents and/or compelled to take care of themselves since the beginning of time. Stories of such youth have been ingrained in history and have been mentioned in religious writings (e.g., Bible, Torah, Quran, and Talmud) (Askeland, 2006, Whitman, 2023). Youth were frequently placed in indentured labor, almshouses, asylums, and orphanages prior to the establishment of child welfare agencies (e.g., foster care) (Askeland, 2006; Rymph, 2017). Such practices were carried over from Europe into the colonies, where Elizabethan/English Poor Law allowed poor families to board out their children for labor until they reached adulthood (Hana et al., 2017; Quijada-Banks, 2020). The first orphanage in the United States was established in the south in 1729 (Olasky, 1999). Historically, orphanages were exclusive to white children (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Geiger & Schelbe, 2021; Roberts, 2001; Rymph,

2017). Billingsley and Giovannoni (1972) affirm that Black youth and families relied on the few Black orphanages established by community members to assist themselves.

In the 1850s, Charles Loring Brace began to initiate the country's transition away from orphanages and toward a 'placing-out-system or child relocation system (e.g., foster care) (Geiger & Schelbe, 2021; Hana et al., 2017; Olasky, 1998; Rymph, 2017). Brace was responsible for founding the Children's Aid Society in New York City (NYC) in 1853. Under this organization, Brace established orphan trains, which relocated abandoned and poor children from NYC to rural family homes all over the U.S. Children were put onto trains and transported to family homes where they would be raised and taught various skills without the legal ties presented in indentured servitude contracts (Rymph, 2017). More often than not, youth were sent to farm homes where they would help as farmhands in return for a home environment. Close to 250,000 youth were transported in passenger cars between 1854 and 1929 to new homes across the country (Geiger & Schelbe, 2021; Sarubbi, 2019). The American foster care system was started on the basis of Brace's relocation work. The first adoption agencies were not to safeguard children but to offer offspring to white couples that could not conceive independently (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). Several services continued to benefit white families and their children and remained inaccessible to youth and families of color.

As time went on, several policies were put in place that further established the modern-day child welfare service. For instance, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) agency, which was regarded as the first child protection organization of its kind, was established in 1875 (AskeLand, 2006; Geiger & Schelbe, 2021). The Social Security Act of 1935, based on the Assistance to Dependent Children (ADC) program, subsequently known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), made financial resources available

to states to assist with maltreated and fostered youth (AskeLand, 2006; Geiger & Schelbe, 2021). In 1974, Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), which used statewide funding to investigate, identify, and report child abuse and neglect cases (Hana et al., 2017; Myers, 2008). Geiger and Schelbe (2021), Quijada-Banks (2020), Askeland (2006), and Child Welfare Information Gateway (2023) identified a few examples of other policies that were pertinent to the expansion of child welfare services (See Table 2.)

Table 2.

Foster Care Laws and Policies

1977	Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)	An association of judge-appointed volunteers from each state that advocates for abused and neglected youth.
1978	Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)	Prohibiting Indigenous children from being taken from their homes and causing ongoing cultural harm.
1980	Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA)	Evaluated if it was necessary to remove a juvenile from their home in order to safeguard the family and provided financial resources to people who adopted youth in care.
1994	Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)	Enacted agencies to strategically recruit diverse families, and open adoption opportunities to families of all races and nationalities in hopes of reducing the time of a youth's placement in care and moving away from racial matching in adoptions.
1996	Interethnic Placement Act (IEPA)	Was employed as an amendment of MEPA to decrease racial discrimination in the adoption processes.
1997	Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)	Imposed the chance for parents or guardians to better their circumstances prior to the permanent removal of children and the formal revocation of their rights.
2008	Fostering Connections to Success & Increasing Adoption Act (FCSIAA)	Legislation that allowed youth to continue attending their home schools even if they were relocated to another county, offered opportunities for extended family members to adopt youth, keep siblings together, and increased support services from 18 - 21 years old.
2018	Family First Prevention Serie Act	The law offers families preventive measures (such as access to mental health services, various substance treatments, and parenting skills) in an attempt at preserving families so that youth are not taken away from their homes.

Though child welfare services expanded, and policies seemingly began to be more inclusive of racially marginalized youth and families, Black youth in particular were still subjected to violence and discrimination within the foster care system. The next section reviews the literature on Black youth experiences in foster care.

Black Youth in Foster Care

Black families continue to be subjected to discriminatory tactics that routinely cause them harm and trauma, and the child welfare system continues to prosecute them in a number of unethical ways (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Johnson, 2021; Montgomery, 2022, Roberts, 2012, 2022; Whitman, 2022). The overrepresentation of Black youth in foster care has existed historically and persists today (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Hana et al., 2017; Roberts, 2022). Black children are placed in foster care at higher rates than their peers of all other races, which has been a concern in the U.S. (Boyle-Duke, 2015; Roberts 2022) and Canada (Cénat et al, 2021; Rambally, 1995). Black and brown families are more commonly subjected to more frequent and severe child protection services (CPS) investigations, receive higher rates of CPS reports, and are encumbered with more obstacles when trying to get their children back (Dworsky et al., 2010; Roberts, 2022). For instance, in comparison to their white peers, Black fostered youth are not only more likely to be taken from their homes but also more prone to being moved around within the system, spend longer amounts of time in care, are the least likely to return home, and are least likely to be adopted (Cooper, 2013). The child welfare and foster care systems are the modern-day equivalent of slavery, and the dissolution of Black families is an integral component of American history (McKee, 2021; Roberts, 2022). As stated by Roberts (2022), no care or welfare is provided for Black families and their children, and the system merely polices Black families. Equally, Whitman (2023) asserts that foster care is a carceral system for Black youth and adolescents. When compared to their peers, Black adolescents in

foster care are more likely to be put in kinship care; yet such placement is still susceptible to little government support needed to fully support the family (Nwachuku et al., 2021; Roberts, 2001). Black families are consistently harmed and subjected to negative conditions that are frequently irreversible by the child welfare system's persistently oppressive nature.

Black adolescents in foster care are regularly exposed to complex situations that do not always lead to higher education possibilities. Black foster youth frequently face significant challenges both while in care and after. Some youths are separated from their families, such as siblings who are also in the system, as a result of their many placements. Black youth in care are more likely to be split up from their siblings than any other group (Font & Kim, 2022). Moreover, adolescents of color in foster care are recurrently diagnosed with disabilities, placed in special education courses, transfer schools often, accrue more absences, and experience more school suspensions, which frequently delays or prevents their graduation (Jaramillo et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2014). Black foster care youth are more likely than their peers to elope and run away from the foster care system (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Wulczyn, 2020). It could be inferred that Black youth often run away to escape the trauma and discrimination they typically face within the foster care system (e.g., the system, other youth, caretakers, social workers, etc.). The youth who run away, become emancipated, or age out of the foster care system are typically faced with additional challenges, including lower school achievement, higher imprisonment rates, unemployment, human- trafficked, substance abuse, homelessness, and food insecurity (Wulczyn, 2020). Notwithstanding the parallels highlighted in the aforementioned contexts, gender plays a role in the multifaceted experiences of Black youth with foster care histories.

Black Women in Foster Care

Black women with foster care histories often encounter unparalleled experiences when compared to their female counterparts and Black male adolescents in care (Boyle-Duke, 2015; Daughtery, 2011; Dove & Powers, 2018; Ocasio, 2022; Roberts, 2011; Simmons-Horton et al., 2023; Williams-Butler, 2019). Williams-Butler and colleague's (2019) quantitative analysis of 489 Black adolescents (207 females and 282 males) who had experienced foster care discovered that, compared to boys, females were less likely to have relational permanency (i.e., social support systems) and varied promotive qualities (i.e., traits that support perseverance and resilience). Finding supportive networks for Black girls with foster care backgrounds can be challenging, especially when it comes to seeking help with identifying and comprehending cultural feminine customs. For example, the qualitative study of eleven Black girls (ages 13 – 17) conducted by Dove and Powers (2018) focused on their hair experiences (e.g., colorism, racism, learning to style) in various types of foster care settings. The findings highlighted the participants' thoughts, behaviors, and cultural socialization messages about hair, racial identity, and self-esteem (see also Ashley & Brown, 2015). On top of that, Black girls who are placed in foster care recurrently face severe forms of both racism and sexism. For example, Black girls in foster care are more likely to experience sexual assaults, exploitation, and numerous forms of abuse (Boyle-Duke, 2015; Simmons-Horton et al., 2023; Williams-Butler, 2018). Also, compared to their white female counterparts, Black girls and Hispanic girls in foster care have greater rates of pregnancy (King & Wert, 2017). For Black girls, the foster care system is a cyclical system with the tendency to have long-term effects on them. As Roberts (2011, 2022) asserted, prisons, foster care, and child welfare all combine to make life untenable for Black girls and women. Each system feeds into the other and preys on Black and brown female bodies,

making it impossible for mothers to keep their children, remain in contact with or build relationships with their children, or get their children back once they have been taken.

Black Males in Foster Care

In contrast to their peers, Black males who have encounters with foster care have a peculiar set of experiences (Dyce, 2015; Miller et al., 2014; Piccolo, 2022; Scott et al., 2011). Black males are more likely to be placed in foster care (Miller et al., 2014;), least likely adopted (Bacarra et al., 2010), and more likely to be returned to the system (Sattler & Font, 2021) and not to their families, (Miller et al., 2014). Other academics have referenced the educational challenges that Black males with foster care backgrounds often face (Hunter et al., 2014; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Okpych, 2015). For instance, they often encounter higher levels of special education placement (Dyce, 2015; Scott et al., 2009), more suspensions (Sandals & Magdaleno, 2013), lower graduation rates, and higher dropout rates (Clemens et al., 2017). For example, Sandals and Madaleno's (2016) study of 38 Black males with foster care backgrounds in California investigated the social and academic variables that impacted their educational experiences. The participants discussed how people (e.g., school staff, teachers, social workers, and family members) who were supposed to be supporting them failed to do so and how they were perpetually victimized by racism. Similar outcomes were discussed by participants in Rios and Rocco's (2014) study of ethnically diverse youth in Florida.

During their time in care and after leaving care, Black males are less receptive to seeking professional help in regard to their overall support and mental health (Scott & Davis, 2006; Scott et al., 2015). Moreover, they are more likely to be unemployed and engaged in criminal activities. For example, in Wrotten's (2018) study of 504 Black males with foster care experiences, 95.2% reported having been incarcerated within three years of aging out of the

foster care system. All of the participants were 21 years old and reported having different levels of educational attainment (i.e., 465- high school/GED, 34-vocational license/certificate, 5- associates or higher). The myriad of unpleasant experiences encountered by this vulnerable population is the result of American disdain for the Black male body.

Racial Ethnic Socialization and Racial Identity Construction of Black Youth with Foster Care Histories

Growing up as a Black individual can present considerable daily benefits and challenges. Adverse perceptions of one's racial identity have been demonstrated to trigger psychological and physiological responses that sometimes result in detrimental impacts on mental well-being and negative reflections on self-identity (Ludeke, 2023). Negative reflections on self-identity often become negative self-talk, and positive reflections often become positive self-talk, both of which become building blocks for racial identity. That is, racial identity is psychological and physiological and impacted by adverse perceptions as well as positive perceptions (Cross, 1971; Sellers et al., 1998). The development of racial identity starts with an individual's self-awareness and evolves over time through ongoing experiences, and various interactions between numerous social factors, often offering continual chances for new insights and understanding (Baber, 2012, Devost, 2022). Grappling with uncertainties or an incomplete understanding of one's race, ethnicity, and identity can exacerbate an individual's experiences. Identity is shaped in many ways, including by family, historical circumstances, real-world experiences, and social and political variables; as a result, the construction of racial identity is not characterized by a predictable pattern (Devost, 2022). Research has underscored the significance of family, particularly parents, as primary educators in conversations about race. Research has emphasized the pivotal role of family, especially parents, as primary educators in discussions about race, particularly regarding racial socialization and identity formation (Banerjee et al., 2017; Gaskin,

2015). Racial socialization highlights the manner in which Black families educate and guide their Black children in comprehensively embracing and navigating their racial identities within various contexts (e.g., caste imperialist system) of the world (Whitman et al., 2023). For Black individuals with backgrounds in foster care, navigating such circumstances can pose significant hindrances within the context of the United States and its child welfare system. For example, understanding and making sense of their racial identities could present some challenges and difficulties for Black foster care youth who have spent extended periods of time in child welfare services, adopted into families and/or surrounded by communities that do not look like them who have spent (Whitman et al., 2023). Further, transracial adoptees and their adoptive parents often encounter a multitude of complexities and challenges when navigating racial, ethnic, and culture socialization dynamics (Goar et al., 2017; Perry, 2024; Whitman et al., 2023). Racial and identity socialization coupled with additional intersectional identities can pose different obstacles for many disadvantaged groups (e.g., Black women, Black LGBTQ, and Black individuals from foster care). In Devost (2023), the author examines how three Black college women reflected on their time in foster care and how that experience affected their college experiences and the formation of their racial identities through the use of qualitative data (i.e., semi-structured interviews). Her research shows that racial identity reflection among Black women college students from foster care backgrounds is influenced by their experiences. This is evident in their opportunities to connect with their biological families, feelings of discomfort around other Black people, and involvement in activism initiatives. The participants' various origin stories and understandings of their own selves influenced how they perceived their time attending a PWI in California. In order to fully comprehend the identity development and socialization of Black

college students with foster care histories, additional research is required, as Devost's (2022) study is only one of a small number of works that examines such circumstances.

The American foster care system has historically and contemporarily oppressed Black youth and has systematically tried to remove opportunities for their success. Some states and programs have attempted to support foster care youth writ large, particularly with higher education, yet resources are few and unknown to foster youth. The proceeding section highlights the benefits and challenges of existing higher education support for foster care adolescents.

Higher Education Supports for Youths with Foster Care Backgrounds

While there are some support structures in place for foster care adolescents to attend college (i.e., tuition waivers, scholarships, and campus support programs), many of them are typically unaware of the options available to them (Okypch, 2015). There are, for example, a variety of national and statewide efforts in place to assist college-going students with foster care histories. For instance, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (formerly known as the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999) aids in offering financial assistance to foster care youth transition into becoming independent (Gross et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Health & Services, 2012). The Chafee program grants funds to youth with foster care histories, that they can spend in a variety of ways, although the funds are frequently stressed as possible sources to assist with educational advancement. Further, the program is responsible for providing education and training vouchers (ETVs), which is additional funding (i.e., \$5,000.00 per year) to youth pursuing higher education. Youths eligible for funding must have experienced foster care after the age of 14, are only eligible until the age of 26, and can only receive assistance for up to five years.

On top of that, a rising number of states have started offering tuition waivers, scholarships, and grants for adolescents with foster care backgrounds (Geiger & Johnson, 2023;

Simmel et al., 2013; Watt & Faulkner, 2020). Hernandez and colleagues (2017) analyzed tuition waiver programs to better understand the scope (e.g., eligibility, requirements, restrictions) of such resources for former foster adolescents across 22 states. While there was some commonality, there were also some distinctions based on the individual's age when they entered foster care, time spent in care, tuition coverage amount, and the number of semesters or years a student may access and use the waivers. Although waivers aid this understudied population, the study further demonstrates that there is no standardized approach across states to assist foster adolescents, which likely adds to the complexity of obtaining a higher education degree.

Lastly, a variety of institutions (e.g., community college, HBCU, PWI, women's college) have started or implemented campus support programs for youth with foster care histories. Some programs have been identified in the table below (see Table 3). Campus support programs have been crucial in the recruitment and retention of this underserved population and have been places of support (e.g., financial, advising/guidance, housing, food, family) and safety for this vulnerable student population (Amechi 2020; Brown, 2017; Collins et al., 2023; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Unrau et al., 2017; Watt et al., 2013). Additionally, the program staff and personnel have been instrumental in helping the students persist at their institutions and work towards graduation.

Table 3.
Campus Support Programs for College Students with Foster Care Backgrounds

Arizona State University - Bridging Success Program	University of Central Florida-Knight Alliance Program	University of Washington—Champions Program
Boise State University - Impact Scholars Program	University of Houston-Diamond Family Scholars Program	Western Michigan University—Seita Scholars Program
California State University, Fullerton – Guardian Scholar Program	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor- Blavin Scholars Program	Wake Tech Community College—Fostering Bright Futures Program
Colorado State University – Fostering Success Program	University of San Diego- Torero Renaissance Scholars Program	Ball State University—Guardian Scholars Program

Florida International University – Fostering Panther Pride Program	University of Wisconsin-Stout— Fostering Success Program	The University of California, Berkeley— Berkeley Hope Scholars
Florida State University – Unconquered Scholars Program	San Jose City College – Guardian Scholars Program	Wayne State University— CHAMPS Program
Johnson C. Smith University – Guardian Scholars	University of Colorado Boulder— Guardian Scholars Program	Wright State University— Independent Scholars Network Program
Middle Tennessee State University – Next Step Program	University of South Florida— USF Pearls Program	Blue Ridge Community College— Great Expectations
Texas State University – FACES Program	Dawson Community College— Dawson Promise Program	Penn State University— Fostering Lions Program
University of Alabama – Alabama Reach Program	Maricopa Community Colleges— Bridging Success Programs	Pepperdine University— Horizon Scholars Program

* The table contains some campus support programs for college students with foster care backgrounds and is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

College-Going Students with Foster Care Backgrounds

Academic research on college students with foster care backgrounds is growing.

Academics contend that higher education attendance and completion would be ideal for young people who have exited the foster care system because college degrees are linked to better life outcomes (Watt et al., 2013). Despite having higher education aspirations, very few former foster youths enroll in post-secondary education, and even fewer complete their degrees (Kearney et al., 2019; Pecora et al., 2006). Scholars are increasingly examining the experiences of former foster care youth and their journeys to and through higher education (e.g., Amechi, 2016; Kearney et al., 2019; Jones & Dean, 2020; Jones & Varga, 2021; Morton, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Yang & Bechtold, 2021). The current research identifies their experiences across various areas of higher education. For example, researchers have examined the experiences of college-going students with foster care backgrounds with: pre-college programs (Jackson et al., 2022; Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019; Kirk & Day, 2011), the barriers they encounter in pursuit of higher education generally (Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Morton, 2018; Toms et al.,

2022; Tobolowsky et al., 2019), support programs and services (Brown et al., 2021; Dworsky & Perez, 2010, Piel et al., 2020), resilience in higher education (Johnson, 2021; Murray, 2013; Salazar et al., 2016), housing instability (Dworsky et al., 2012; Davis, 2006; Skobba et al., 2022), transferring between various institutions, dropping out, college re-entry (Day et al., 2022; Ludeke, 2023), and life after college (Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Schelbe et al., 2023). Scholars have also looked at how former foster youth choose their institutions. For instance, Gross and colleagues' (2020) quantitative study employed Perna's college choice model to analyze the college choice and enrollment pathways of 1,019 students who had been in foster care or a court-ordered dependent since the age of thirteen. They noted that there were four key determinants in their analysis of college choice: the institution's location in relation to distance in deepening their awareness of other cultures; recommendations from significant others in their lives (e.g., parents, relatives, teachers, counselors); financial aid; and the institution's religious affiliation. The findings shed light on the factors and meaning-making that influenced the students' college choice decisions.

Existing research has looked at the college-going process of Black HBCU students with foster care histories. Smith et al.'s (2015) qualitative phenomenological study applied a resiliency theory to discern the college choices of four African American students (two males and two females) who were placed in foster care after having experienced neglect. The participants indicated that they chose their institution (a large public HBCU in the Mid-Atlantic region) because of their prior knowledge/exposure to the campus, supportive persons (e.g., social workers) who assisted them in enrolling, and the institution's reputation as a close-knit community. Similarly, Amechi et al. (2020) investigated the college choice of seven Black college students from foster care at a small private HBCU in the southeast. The authors explored

the participants' experiences augmented by different types of capital within Yosso's (2005) CCW framework. The participants asserted that the institution's campus support program for former foster care youth and supportive networks were instrumental in their college choice and enrollment processing. An overlap of influential people and various support systems has been present throughout the literature currently looking at college choice for college students with foster care experiences.

Black College-Going Students with Foster Care Histories

While the bulk of studies on Black youth formerly in foster care has been on deficit outcomes, some researchers have begun to emphasize the tenacity and sheer determination of this understudied population in their pursuits of higher education attainment (Amechi, 2016; Devost, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Lane, 2016, 2020; Murray, 2013; Piccolo, 2022; Smith et al., 2015; Simmons-Horton et al., 2023; Strayhorn, 2021; Whitman, 2021). For instance, Rios and Rocco's (2013) study of 24 ethnically diverse college student participants (18 Black non-Hispanic, one Black Hispanic, one white-Hispanic, and four white) from Florida with foster care backgrounds underlined important individuals and facets that benefited them in their higher education goals. Students emphasized the importance of school support (e.g., teachers, counselors, rigorous academic settings), foster care support (e.g., foster parents, social workers), community supports (e.g., older siblings, mentors), and their own internal support (e.g., motivation, perseverance, self-efficacy) as contributors in the significance of their educational triumphs. Lane's (2020) phenomenological qualitative study examined the college experiences (four-year HBCU & PWI in Mid-Atlantic states) of 10 African Americans (eight females, two males) who aged out of foster care. Even though each participant had received some financial assistance (such as grants and vouchers), they all acknowledged they all worked and strategized to cover their day-to-day needs. Also, they stated that they continued with their

educational journeys because they did not want their identities to be positioned in the Americanized stereotypes typically associated with Black people and young people who have been in foster care (e.g., not academically strong, don't go to college; also see Murray, 2013). Therefore, they were strong self-advocates, tenacious in the search for resources, and maintained good grades.

Johnson's (2021) case study, which was based on a national sample, looked at the academic resiliency of 11 strong academic-performing (3.0 GPA or higher) Black male college students who had previously been in foster care. The study shed light on the experiences of the participants who had little to no relationship with their biological parents but insisted that support from extended families (such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousins), foster parents, and others (such as school staff, social workers, peers), in addition to participating in an independent living program, aided in their access and retention in their higher education pathways. Likewise, Devost's (2022) study based in California used Black feminist thought and intersectionality frameworks to explore how African American women's foster care experiences shaped their racial identities as college students. The three participants in the study took lessons from their foster care experiences (e.g., the significance of support systems, asking for help, environment adjustments, reframing situations, and relationships with men) and reshaped them into acquired knowledge as Black women in America and college students. When taken as a whole, the literature suggests that this understudied population consistently uses their adverse experiences as strengths, relies on strong support networks, and genuinely trusts themselves to guide their own educational routes.

While persistence at institutions of higher education can be challenging, some students with foster care backgrounds have been successful. Fostered adolescents frequently wish to

further their education, but their journeys are frequently rendered challenging by a variety of issues. For instance, they might not have the means and support networks needed to help them pursue higher education. Additionally, they are often unaware of the institutions offering foster care support programs and/or state services that assist in educational funding, which could all be essential in helping them decide on an educational institution and a major.

Gaps in Literature Summary

The literature review provided a synthesis and summary of research from a range of data sources (e.g., books, book chapters, research briefs, dissertations, and empirical studies) that examined the foster care system in the U.S., the experiences of Black youth within child welfare systems, the educational pathways of college students with foster care backgrounds, college choice, and academic major choices. Prior research has used various sorts of examination (e.g., qualitative, quantitative) and varied theoretical frameworks to begin to explore the higher education experiences of college students with foster care backgrounds. Yet, there appears to be a gap in the knowledge of the educational experiences of Black college students from foster care backgrounds. Notably, a good portion of higher education foster care youth studies are quantitative and are absent of race. Although there is some coverage on the educational experiences of former foster youths, there is limited empirical exploration, particularly for Black college students with foster care backgrounds. In general, more needs to be learned about the experiences of Black college students who have been in foster care. Turning the tables on the typical outcomes of such a population may aid them in calling out the repressive constraints that continue to complicate and affect Black and brown families that funnel them from one oppressive system to the next. Namely, listening to Black college students, who were previously in foster care, making sense of their college choice and academic major choice processes can build viable practices that can help future generations. This dissertation and subsequent research

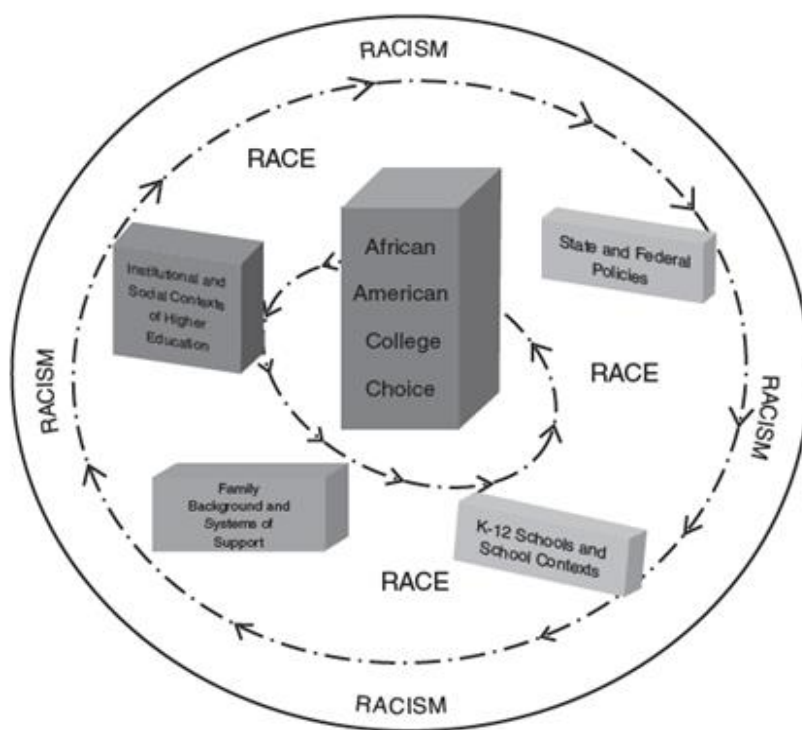
may be able to find approaches to assist more Black foster care adolescents in obtaining and completing higher education. A college degree is frequently associated with increased advantages (e.g., employment, financial gains) that may be advantageous to this population. Such emphasis by researchers and institutions may be beneficial in terms of diversifying institutions, academic majors, and career paths.

While some scholars have begun to perform this work using asset-based lenses, this study further expands knowledge on and with this student population. This study draws attention to crucial issues that could benefit concerned stakeholders (e.g., child welfare, K-12, higher education). Further, this study helped with the creation and application of new research questions and revolutionary practices. By identifying strengths and areas of improvement within college and academic major choices, stakeholders are able to improve educational and career pathway opportunities for Black foster youths with higher education aspirations.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL MODEL

As described in Chapter 2, scholars have previously examined students' college choices (Chapman 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). However, many of those frameworks or models are not inclusive and/or focused race. Unlike other scholars' work in college choice, Chapman and colleagues' (2020) conceptual model of African American (Figure 1) college choice upholds the importance of race in the college choice process. They developed a new model specifically for African American students using scholarship from Critical Race Theory (CRT), their research findings, and previous understanding of the college choice process.

Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of African American College Choice



The conceptual model of African American college choice developed by Chapman and colleagues (2020) was applied to gain a deeper understanding of the college-going process of Black students who had foster care histories. The conceptual model of African American college

choice developed by Chapman and colleagues has its roots in a number of critical race theory (CRT) tenets, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW), and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice (i.e., predisposition, search, and choice). Their model corroborates the intricacies that Black college students grapple with when determining which institution of higher education to attend (See Figure 1). Chapman and associate's (2020) model upholds how race plays a vital role in the college choice process of Black college students. As an analytical lens, "we use critical race theory (CRT) to explain the complicated interactions between African American student's decision-making and the institutional and structural components, impacted by issues of race, which influence their college choice process" (p. 15). Chapman and colleagues use CRT alongside CCW as an anti-deficit perspective to explore multiple kinds of capital that Black students use to choose their higher education institution. This strategy corresponds with the need to comprehend Black college students' experiences through a model tailored specifically to them. More particularly, the model offers a lens for scholars to understand Black college-going students tactically traversing through state and federal policies, institutional and social context of higher education, family background and systems of support, and K-12 schools and school contexts. While the model was created to explore college choice, this same model may capture the influential factors that aid students in their academic major choice. This conceptual model not only emphasizes "choice," it also takes into account student choices contingent on cultural and racial aspects. This model helps inform my work by further interrogating the racial tensions that have historically been perpetuated on Black and brown bodies in the child welfare system and higher education.

Critical Race Theory, which originated in legal studies, raised the issue of White supremacist (i.e., racism) practices being integrated into all facets of Black people's daily lives.

Consequently, CRT offered a prism through which to view and analyze the power structures and classification of potential advancements disguised by societal norms (Chapman et al., 2020). A multitude of academics have raised awareness and assessed the oppressive patterns present in the multinational political and social structures by using Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The application of CRT to challenge the racialized impacts in higher education was initially done by Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995). Since then, disparities in educational standards and experiences have been challenged through the ongoing utilization of CRT. For instance, scholars have applied CRT to understand the experiences of, but not limited to Black middle school students (Berry, 2008;) Black high schoolers (Caton, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007), Black college athletics (Cooper & Hakins, 2014; Harrison et al., 2017), Black educators (e.g., teachers and faculty) (Bryan, 2021; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Croom & Patton, 2011), microaggressions/campus climates (Griffin et al., 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000), Black foster care youth (Whitman, 2016; Sandals & Magdaleno, 2016). Although a wide range of educational research has been covered by CRT, more work is required to understand the educational experiences of Black students (i.e., K-20) currently and formerly in foster care.

A number of tenets are identified by CRT scholars as the core building blocks of CRT (Chapman et al., 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021). In education, CRT consists of several primary tenets: (a) racial realism, (b) interest convergence, (c) race is socially constructed, (d) intersectionality, and (e) counter-stories/counter-narratives. While the tenets are frequently outlined independently, they regularly complement one another and join as an analytical framework used to confront racist traditions and rhetoric. Chapman and colleagues (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice draws on a subset of tenets from

CRT. Their college choice model explores the racialized realities of Black students by utilizing racial realism, intersectionality, interest convergence, and counter-stories tenets. The same four tenets will be used in this study to examine the college-going process of Black college students with foster care histories. Racial realism heightens that racism is standard and routine in society. Society conducts business and goes about its everyday routines using racist practices that disproportionately affect persons of color in the U.S. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021). According to Chapman and colleagues (2020), African American students and families live their entire lives under W.E.B. Dubois' concept of double consciousness, which recognizes that Black people frequently view themselves through the lens of others (i.e., white people), and college choice is no exception. That is to say, when selecting a higher education institution, students frequently weigh their own experiences with race and racism. The recognition of these lenses may be important for Black college students with foster care experiences as they make sense of themselves in the world and the world around them.

Black feminist and critical race researchers originally used intersectionality to interrogate historic ideological constructs that impact how individuals (i.e., women) move through multiple positionalities and how they are viewed around the world. Intersectionality refers to the multiplicity of ways that pairing identities, such as race, interact with other subordinate identities (e.g., age, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ability/disability, religion) to shape what it means to be Black in the world (Chapman et al., 2020; Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) pinpointed how the different identity layers of Black women, often compounded their societal marginalization. According to Crenshaw (1991;1995), intersectionality can be used to identify distinctions among social groups in systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

Chapman and colleagues (2020) expound upon Crenshaw's (1991) three types of critical race intersectionality (i.e., representational, structural, and political) in further understanding college choice for Black students. Representational intersectionality refers to stereotypical depictions of certain individuals or groups of people in specific societal contexts (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, in mainstream media, Black people are often seen as aggressive, over-sexualized, and poor. In particular, when it comes to education, Black people are widely seen as uninterested, illiterate, and unable to enter and graduate from institutes of higher learning. Similar to this, stereotypes and biases are frequently directed at people with foster care histories; however, this study aims to challenge those perceptions.

Structural intersectionality describes how individuals' experiences within a specific demographic group can vary contingent upon their other converged identities (Crenshaw, 1991). More precisely, the experiences of Black women are frequently significantly different from those of Black men. In a comparable manner, such socially constructed roles are imposed on Black students with different educational upbringings/experiences, such as those who are low-income, first-generation (i.e., no parent graduated with a college degree), and/or second-plus generation (i.e., one parent has a college degree) (Chapman et al., 2020). Following the same logic, Black college students with foster care histories could draw from a variety of perspectives (i.e., placement types, emancipated/adopted, knowing biological family/not knowing family, etc.) that have shaped their unique experiences.

Political intersectionality emphasizes the difficulty of balancing the privileges and/or power of multiple marginalized identities, the inability to be viewed as multilayered or complex individuals, and the occasionally difficult task of navigating conflicting identities (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, the experience of race at the nexus of gender is often not delineated in the

mainstream antiracist rhetoric (Crenshaw, 1991). That is, the experiences of Black women differ from the experiences of other women of color and men of color. According to Chapman and colleagues (2020), in college choice, it's critical to dispel uniform conceptions and emphasize the wide range of distinctions among Black college students, including their distinct family structures, geographical locations, linguistic backgrounds, and cultural heritages.

Likewise, related ideas can be explored when understanding Black students with foster care backgrounds as they decide on a college and academic major, as they can also draw from a diverse combination of traits and facets.

Another advantage of CRT is that it enables researchers to elevate the voices of frequently marginalized groups of people by using counter-stories and/or counter-narratives. “Counter-stories are narratives or composite stories that speak to power in an effort to defy myths, derail stereotypes, and expand people’s notions of the human condition” (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 20). Beyond that, counter-stories distinguish individual experiences from dominant groups and grant ownership of experienced knowledge to those whose voices are frequently absent. Using counter-stories, according to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), “gives voice and turns the margins into places of transformative resistance” (p. 37). Such a construct is critical for identifying Black students' college choices independently from their fellow peers (Chapman et al., 2020). Counter-stories, in a similar vein, aid in differentiating how Black college students with foster care histories traversed many racialized systems (e.g., child welfare, K -12 education) in order to decide on their educational institution.

The final CRT tenet embraced by Chapman and colleagues in their college choice model for Black students is interest convergence. As explained by Bell (1980), interest convergence occurs when White individuals are only interested in racial justice when it provides advantages

for themselves. When it suits their particular necessities and interests at particular periods, white people in the United States are willing to talk about diversity and justice (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Welton et al., 2023). Put differently, the sacrifices and interests of Black people are minimized in order to uphold white supremacy. Chapman and colleagues (2020) recognize interest convergence in viewing states' enthusiasm for building and retaining a strong professional workforce, which is targeted at the enrollment and graduation of more college students (e.g., gives more Black students access to institutions of higher education). Moreover, research needs to further explore how understudied marginalized communities such as those with foster care experience are subjected to interest convergence.

Chapman and colleagues (2020) rely on Yosso's (2005) CCW framework "to explain student resilience and student's forms of capital" (p. 12), and further investigate how students traverse the three stages of college choice given in Hossler and Gallagher's model. Yosso's CCW (2005) builds on Bourdieu's studies and is anchored in CRT, advocating that communities of color preserve and uphold various forms of cultural capital (e.g., knowledge sources). Her framework (i.e., CCW) augments sources of capital from communities of color while rejecting white modes of knowing as it pertains to surviving and facing resistance (Yoss, 2005). Individuals from marginalized groups can overcome constraints and unjust conditions in society by utilizing their different types of capital. Six different types of capital (i.e., aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, and social) make up CCW, which provides anti-deficit framing to strengthen people of color's ability to maneuver and combat white dominance. Despite being discussed independently, the capitals frequently intersect and build upon one another to provide richly detailed concepts of cultural enlightenment. The six types of capital are explained below alongside possible examples that represent the experiences of Black adolescents

who are or were in foster care in order to better correlate with the study's participant sample (see Table 4.). Chapman and colleagues (2020) assert that these capitals together help make sense of the college choice process of Black students.

Table 4.
Community Cultural Wealth

Capital	CCW (Yosso, 2005)	Current and/or Former Foster Care Youth
Aspirational	“refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (pg. 77).	Black youth in foster care can see themselves in a life outside of their adverse experiences. For example, they can see themselves being in institutions of higher education, having a professional career, and starting a family of their own.
Familial	“refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among <i>familia</i> (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (pg. 79).	Black youth in foster care may draw diverse forms of knowledge from their families (e.g., biological, adoptive).
Linguistic	“includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (pg. 778)	Black youth in foster care learn and grow in their ability to communicate in different ways through a variety of experiences. For example, they may know more than one language (e.g., community/background savvy, be very attentive to body language, academically versatile).
Navigational	“refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (pg. 80).	Black youth in foster care maneuver child welfare services and school systems that aren't tailored for them.
Resistant	“refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (pg. 80)	Black youth in foster care endure and overcome prejudice and discriminatory policies and practices in child welfare, education, and occupational careers.
Social	“can be understood as networks of people and community resources” (pg. 79)	Black youth with foster care histories can use their assortment of supportive individuals and resources to plot various courses

Chapman and colleagues also integrate Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice to describe how Black students find their way through the three stages (i.e., predisposition, search, choice) of college choice. The three steps outline how prospective college students collect, analyze, and evaluate different kinds of post-secondary institution information. The three stages function concurrently rather than as distinct stages and students move through the stages with considerations from other forms of capital (e.g., familial, social) (Chapman et al., 2020). Such stages could be utilized to further understand the college choice and major choice of Black college students with foster care histories.

Table 5.
Hossler and Gallagher's College Choice Model

	Predisposition	Search	Choice
Definition	“Students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school” Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 209)	“potential matriculants start to seek more information about colleges, universities, and non-college options (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 213)	“students narrow their choice set to specific institutions to enter” (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 215)
Influential Factors	Student Background (e.g., SES, educational abilities, networks) Significant Others (e.g., family, friends, community members) Educational Activities (e.g., school clubs, sports teams, pre-college programs) Institution Characteristics (e.g., location)	Student preliminary Values (e.g., geographical range, quality/merit of institution) Student Search Activities (e.g., Students broaden their search boundaries by talking with others, reviewing potential financing sources, and explore state policies) Higher Education Institutions Search for Students (e.g., aid eligibility, recruitment efforts, public policy maker contributions)	Choice Set (e.g., collection of schools students will apply to in hopes of enrollment) College and University courtship activities (e.g., quality/reputation, funding options, fit, academic programs)
Student Outcome	Higher Education or additional options	Condense institutional options or explore other post high school opportunities	Make a choice
Relation to this study	During this stage, Black college students with foster care experiences	At this stage, Black college students with foster care experiences	In this final round, Black college students with foster care experiences

	decide whether college is for them and draw on their lived experiences.	look for prospective higher education institutions that will best benefit them.	choose which colleges to apply to base on their research and interactions with the institutions.
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To understand how Black students select their higher education institutions, Chapman and colleagues' conceptual model of African American college choice draws on a number of CRT tenets, Yosso (2005) CCW, and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice. Even though the conceptual model was established to investigate college choice, this dissertation also supports the model that could be utilized to analyze the academic major choice of Black college students with foster care backgrounds. The components that comprise the model can also be used to explore academic major choice. For example, the tenets of CRT (i.e., racial realism, intersectionality, interest convergence, and counter-stories tenets) incorporated in Chapmans and associates (2020) model can be used to make sense of the racialized encounters that lead to students' unique academic major choices. Similarly, CCW's numerous types of capitals (i.e., aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, social) can be commissioned to uncover key factors that contributed to participants in choosing a particular discipline of study. Likewise, the three stages of college choice (i.e., predisposition, search, and choice) in Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model could explain how and when individuals acquire an interest in and/or decide to pursue a particular academic major at various institutions of higher education. The conceptual model of African American college choice is an appropriate framework because it emphasizes how race and racism play essential roles regarding college students' decisions and provides an anti-deficit lens to make sense of the students' experiences. Furthermore, it offers insight into the maneuvering Black students must endure in conceptualizing their racialized experiences through state and federal policies, institutional and

social context of higher education, family background and systems of support, and K-12 schools and school contexts.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Historically, the main sources of foster care research have used quantitative research designs (Amechi, 2017; Whiting & Lee, 2023) and have been absent of race and cultural aspects (Johnson, 2019). My study included a framework based on Black research, was qualitative and gave space for Black individuals with foster care histories to use their own voices to tell their own stories, on their own terms. This qualitative phenomenological study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do Black college students with foster care backgrounds pursue higher education?

RQ2: How do Black college students with foster care backgrounds make decisions and choices about which higher education institutions to attend?

RQ3: How do Black college students with foster care backgrounds make decisions about choosing of an academic major?

Researcher Epistemology

A constructivist epistemological worldview guided the methodology for this study.

Constructivist worldviews contribute to research in several ways. Constructivist researchers recognize that numerous realities exist and that these realities are constructed by the various individuals living complex lives (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Further, constructivist researchers strive to discover and co-create knowledge based on their interactions with participants and the influences of both of their world experiences (e.g., histories, assumptions, beliefs, cultural aspects) (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This paradigm aids in the creation of knowledge across various and multi-layered worldviews. Specifically, the participants' understanding of their experiences, combined with my interpretations, provide new knowledge as well as potentially change

elements to improve the college-going experiences of Black college students who were previously in foster care.

The participants in this dissertation included Black people across the nation that have had experiences in foster care and may have varying experiences throughout their multifaceted lives (e.g., region, state, gender identity, educational backgrounds, foster care histories, institution type). Participants' experiences were examined through a constructivist lens by considering their social, cultural, and historical contexts and interpreting their lived experiences through their varied worldviews. Understanding their experiences across several realities helped provide nuanced insights into this understudied student population's college-going journey. More specifically, this paradigm developed knowledge from the participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretation. The numerous realities diminished the current knowledge gap (i.e., scholarly, theoretical) that exists in higher education literature, as there is little scholarship that examines the experiences of college students of color with foster care histories (Geiger & Johnson, 2023). Such a paradigm was useful in attempting to understand Black college students with foster care experiences through various precise contexts (e.g., gender, race, social class, foster care, student).

Phenomenological Approach

I use a phenomenological approach to better understand this research's aim. According to Husserl (1970), phenomenology is a qualitative approach that focuses on lived experiences and reveals the essence of consciousness. He suggests that phenomenology considers how people's actions and perceptions affect how they experience a specific phenomenon. According to van Manen (2016), the term "essence" describes the fundamental characteristics of a phenomenon, or "what makes a thing what it is" (pg. 10). In phenomenological scholarship, essence is not one fixed entity, but rather a complex set of conditions that is multi-layered and multi-dimensional.

Moustakas (1994) affirms that a “phenomenological approach involves a return to an experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (pg. 19). By way of explanation, phenomenology examines the experience(s) of an assortment of participants that have all encountered a similar phenomenon and explores their phenomenon in great detail (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kafle, 2011; Mobley, 2018). I chose a phenomenological approach to better understand the essence of college choice and academic major choice of Black college students who aged out of foster care, as this study seeks to analyze and make sense of the participants' lived experiences through their own words.

There are many different phenomenological approaches used in qualitative research (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003). However, a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was employed in understanding the college-going process of Black students with foster care histories. van Manen (2016) offers that hermeneutic phenomenology consists of joint ideologies between several key German philosophers (i.e., Husserl, Hans Georg-Gadamer, Martin Heidegger). According to Hans Georg-Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology, is a human science that focuses on *interpreting* people's life-worlds rather than merely describing or understanding the essence at hand like outlined in Husserl's work (Lavery, 2003; Mobley, 2018; van Manen, 2014, 2016). At the crossroads of these two schools of thought, the phenomenon in question is frequently revealed, elevated, and fresh inquiries are generated. The approach is designed to generate detailed "text" accounts of specific events (i.e. phenomena) experienced by a collective group. Along with that, phenomenological approaches facilitate the discovery of queries that are commonly overlooked or at odds with existing understanding.

Mobley (2018) emphasizes the centrality of an individual's social, cultural, and historical context within the phenomenological approach and states that researchers engaging in hermeneutic phenomenological study need to be deeply involved in "soulful" undertakings. Unlike Husserl's approach to phenomenological examinations, scholars using hermeneutic phenomenology must not bracket or distance themselves from the phenomenon under review. Not removing the researcher's assumptions, biases, and pre-understanding from the study's focus aids in the co-construction and interpretation of knowledge between the interviewees and the researcher. Hermeneutic phenomenological scholars should be attentive and conscious of their positionalities and subjectivities (van Manen, 2014; 2016), especially when conducting research *with* Black participants rather than *on* them (Mobley, 2018). Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology was the most appropriate option to understand why Black college students who were once in foster care decided to pursue higher education, chose particular institutions and academic majors at the intersections of race, social identities, and various forms of capital.

In this dissertation, I employed van Manen's (2016) six concepts which formulate a methodical structure for hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. As van Manen puts forward his six concepts, he affirms that the methodical structure is flexible (i.e., non-linear) and should be used creatively and freely by researchers to uniquely grasp and make sense of the phenomena that are significant to them. The six concepts ought to be independently employed by scholars as a means of emancipating themselves from rigid research procedures and revolutionizing "text" into a phenomenological creative work of knowledge. Despite the fact that these activities guide phenomenological investigation, the research process is not confined to a collection of tactics or fixed stages. van Manen's six concepts guided me in the pathway to interpreting the college-going process of Black students with foster care histories:

- (1) Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- (3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- (6) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 2016, pp. 30-31).

Turning to a Phenomenon which Seriously Interests us and Commits us to the World

van Manen maintains that “phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist” (p.31). Phenomenologists' understanding of the phenomenon and their personal experience within the phenomenon play a critical part in the formulation of a phenomenological question. As I stated in the introduction and further elaborate on in the following sections, my commitment to the world is to draw attention to the discriminatory practices and policies in two oppressive systems (i.e., child welfare services, educational systems) and to use participants' experiences as catalysts for change. My past, present and future ties to the world place me in a co-construction partnership that deepens our understanding of a phenomenon that remains largely unexplored (Mobley, 2015, 2018), the college-going process of Black students with foster care histories.

Investigating Experience as we Live it Rather than as we Conceptualize it

In order to perform phenomenological research, scientists must create a "new contract with the original experience" and/or a "re-learning" of the world in the context of the phenomenon being explored through a variety of "modalities and aspects" (van Manen, 2016, pp 31-32). Human science scholars can uncover different perspectives of essences in various ways in the data collection phase of inquiry exploration. Although phenomenologists are introspective in their sense-making of an essence, they must step outside of themselves (experiences, preconceptions, biases, etc.). This process is configured by drawing and/or generating data from

different sources: participant experiences, phenomenological literature, and additional assets of data (e.g., art, music, tv shows, memoirs) (Mobley, 2015). The data collection producers for this study, which investigates the higher education institution and academic major choices of Black individuals with foster care backgrounds, are explained in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Reflecting on the Essential Themes which Characterize the Phenomenon

During this concept, scholars should be critically reflective in their exploration of the phenomenon in question and open to all conceivable interpretations. Through the reflection and interpretation process, themes emerged from the various human science data sources. van Manen (2016) identifies “themes” as different identities found in other scholarship, in phenomenology themes –is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point (p.87) and they “something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure—grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning (p.79). Three distinct thematic analysis approaches are used by scholars in hermeneutic phenomenological studies. In the coming sections, the process implemented to reveal the college-going essence of Black participants with foster care histories was explored in further depth.

Describing the Phenomenon through the Art of Writing and Rewriting

Reading, writing, and rewriting are essential processes in hermeneutic phenomenology for comprehending and interpreting the essence of an experience. Van Manen (2016) argues that “writing does not merely enter the research process as a final step or stage” (p.111). To discover the “fullness” of an experience, researchers must engage in an intricate series of interrogations. This multifaceted process tends to involve re-writing, re-thinking, re-flecting, and re-cognizing (Mobley, 2015; van Manen, 2016). Further, the phenomenological text created by the art of

writing and rewriting should give emphasis to the *language* (i.e., symbolic nature) and *silence* (i.e., knowledge/interpretation that comes from non-verbal engagement) of the research inquiry. As a result, listening to and interacting with participants' eclectic linguistic capitals, as well as their silence, was critical in understanding the college-going essence. Furthermore, I must be open to numerous stages of reflecting, writing, and rewriting about the counternarratives of Black college students with foster care history college-going processes. Such an approach provided greater clarity in the description and interpretation of the phenomenon.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation to the Phenomenon

“To establish a strong relation with a certain question, phenomenon, or notion, the researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness” (van Manen, 2016, p. 33). He also asserts that researchers must remain steadfast and focused on interpreting the essence and not accept *superficialities* and *falsities*. Researchers should remain committed to utilizing the data sources to generate novel knowledge about the research question. Further scholars should be conscious of their pedagogical frame of mind on the phenomena and not be divorced from their research (Mobley, 2015). Human research scientists need to maintain an unwavering concentration on the phenomenon and possess the ability to thoughtfully discuss any emerging themes that reveal the essence of the inquiry. Beyond that, researchers should be able to link occurrences across themes and across a broad spectrum of literature. The paucity of knowledge presently available to the academy concerning the college-going experiences of Black students with foster care backgrounds, as well as my personal association with this particular population, keeps me passionate about the work at hand.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts as Whole

According to van Manen (2016), “one needs to constantly measure the overall design of the study/text against the significance that the parts must play in the total textual structure” (p. 33). While research consists of multiple independent aspects, there must be a sense of synergy in the study structure. Scholars engaged in hermeneutic work must ensure a strong and robust relationship between the various parts of the design (e.g., researcher, conversational interviews/participant counter-narratives, framework) and the answering of the research questions (e.g., themes/findings). Further, there should be an intense return to the data and the research story. The parts and the whole inquiry must be given careful and reflexive consideration to *reveal the power* drawn from the interpretative process in uncovering the phenomenon. The complex components and the overall whole must be balanced (Mobley, 2015). Understanding the college-going journey of Black students with foster care experiences from both an individual and a holistic perspective is crucial to my research.

Participants

This study was drawn from numerous Black youth with foster care histories across the nation (see Table 6). Having Black students from various states, institutions, and care settings provided more comprehensive findings that may be beneficial for more nuanced findings for various stakeholders (e.g., child welfare, K- 12, higher education institutions). Furthermore, hearing the experiences of different people from across the nation offers a more expansive understanding of commonalities and variations, as well as minimizing any potential biases in the participants' experiences. This study illuminated the accounts of Black college students formerly in foster care and got to the essence of their phenomena across their different experiences (e.g., states, types of care/placements, institutions). Likewise, such awareness could assist stakeholders in understanding participant experiences and propel stakeholders in making reforms and policies

to assist this student demographic in achieving higher education success. Additionally, using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach on the experiences of Black people from across the nation provided more information about a group of college-going students that has not been adequately investigated.

I used purposeful sampling and was intentional about how I selected my participants. Purposeful sampling requires that all participants meet specified criteria that are relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2002) (see also purposive sampling van Manen, 2014). Such a sampling strategy is essential for phenomenological inquiries as it supports thoroughly discovering participants' experiences across the shared phenomena in question (Dortch, 2016; Patton, 2005; Smith & Nizza, 2022, van Manen, 2014, 2016). Obtaining counternarratives that contradict the negative dominant narratives of this understudied population is warranted. Having Black people across the nation who meet specific criteria provided a better understanding of the college-going experiences of Black college students who were previously in foster care across an eclectic intricate population. Furthermore, capturing the essence of their experiences at the national level may have a greater impact on higher education research and practice. All participants met the identified criteria as: (a) 18 or older; (b) current and/or formerly in foster care (c) Black and/or African American; and (d) currently enrolled in a degree-seeking program (e.g., two-year/four-year, undergraduate, graduate) OR unfinished in their program OR recently graduated within the last five years. Participants who had recently graduated offered an extended understanding about the interconnected essence of the college-going process and career choices and/or explorations. Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that in phenomenological studies, sample size can vary. I aimed to include 20-25. The sample size enabled me to draw upon different Black voices and observe data saturation using a hermeneutic phenomenological lens. This

specific approach and sample size were chosen to give an in-depth understanding of the experiences and get to the essence of some Black college students formerly in foster care and their educational journeys. The following demographic tables offer further detailed information of the 31 participants and their experiences (see Table 6 & 7). See Appendix D for additional participant demographics.

Table 6.
Participant Demographic Information

Participants Collective Experiences	
Number of Years in Foster Care	264 years
Number of Foster Care Placements	237 placements
Number of K-12 Schools Attended	296 schools
Higher Education Institutions	53 institutions
Academic Majors	41 majors
Degrees	44

Age	18-25	17
	26-33	10
	34-43	4
Gender	Women	27
	Men	3
	Nonbinary	1
Institution Types	Community College	12
	University/College	41
Degrees	Associates	8
	Bachelors	27
	Masters	5
	PhD/EdD/Other Professional Degrees	4
Student Classification	Unfinished/ On a break	3
	Graduated	6
	Undergraduate	17
	Graduate	5

Table 7.
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym, Age and Gender	Years in Care	Race/Ethnicity	Student Rank	Major & Degree Type	Future Career Professional Goal
Alvin 30 (M)	6	Black	Graduated	Criminal Justice (BA)	Federal Agent
Andre 26 (M)	11	Black/African American	Unfinished	Political Science/Law in Society and Public (AA)	State Rep, Legislation, Senator
Brandy 42 (W)	14	African American	Graduated	Business Administration (BA)	Business Owner
Dana 23 (W)	6	African American	2nd year (sophomore)	Social Work-BA	Social Worker & Esthetician
Darius 41 (M)	2+	African American Mix	3rd year (junior)	Labor Studies & Employment Relations (BA)	Industry Job
Earl 33 (M)	13	Black/African American	Doctoral	Social Work (BA) Social Work (MA) Education (EdD)	Vice President of Student Affairs
Erykah 32 (W)	12	Black/African American	Graduated	Chemistry (BA) STEM (Graduate Degree)	Real Estate
Eve 20 (W)	6	Black	3rd year (junior)	Business and Applied Technology (BA)	Business
Faith 20 (W)	8	African American	1st year (2nd semester)	Psychology (BA)	Veterinarian
Gabriella 20 (W)	1	African American	3rd year (junior)	Dual Special Education & PreK-4 (BA)	Teacher and/or Daycare Teacher
Halle 20 (W)	5	Black/African American	3rd year (junior)	Psychology (BA)	Forensic Psychologist
Inga 26 (W)	11	Black/African American	Graduated	General Education (AA) Psychology (BA)	Therapist
Janet 23 (W)	3	Black & Caucasian	Graduate (1st year)	Business Administration (AA) Financial Planning & Consumer Economics (BA) Business Management (MS)	Unknown
Jill 43 (W)	7	Black & Caucasian	Doctoral Candidate	General Education Studies (AA) Human Services Management (BA) Human Services Management & Leadership (MS) Education (PhD)	College Professor
Kimberly 18 (W)	5	African American	1st year	Communications & Media (BA)	Social Worker
Kioni 23 (W)	14	African American	3rd year (junior)	Social Work (BA)	Social Worker
Lauryn 26 (W)	15	Black	Unfinished	Studio Art (BA)	Visual Artist
Lisa 23 (W)	2	Black/African American	4th year (senior)	Health Society Policy & Business Health Care (BA)	Nonprofit & State Government Health Job
Lola 26 (W)	6	Black/White/Native	2nd year	Phlebotomy (AA)	Sonographer
Marlanna 19 (NB)	3	Black	2nd year (sophomore)	Medical Studies (BA)	Doctor or something in the medical field
Melissa 21 (W)	9	African American	4th year (senior)	Social Work (BA)	Social Worker
Rashia 26 (W)	7	Black/ Dominican/Native/Italian	1st year	Digital Photography (AA)	Graphic Designer & Photographer
Robin 23 (W)	18	Black & Asian	4/5th year senior standing	Human Development & Family Science (BA)	Undecided (For a good organization/company)
Roxanne 18 (W)	16	African American	1st year	Psychology (BA)	Therapist & Real Estate Agent
Sandra 20 (W)	7	Black/White/Native American	2nd year (sophomore)	Legal Studies (BA) Entrepreneurial Business (MS)	Judge Advocate (Lawyer)
Shawntae 20 (W)	6	Black/ African American	Graduated	Education Studies (BA)	Teacher/ College Professor/ Psychiatrist
Teyana 19 (W)	3	Black/African American	1st year	Mathematics Education (BA)	Finance Job & Lawyer
Toni 37 (W)	17	Black/African American	1st year (Doctoral)	Political Science (BA) Public Affairs and Administration (MS) Public and Urban Policy (PhD)	Lawyer & Chief of Staff
Trina 26 (W)	6	Black	Graduated	Visual & Performing Arts concentration in Music (BA)	Music Industry (Singer)
Yolanda 28 (W)	18	Black	Unfinished	Sociology (AA)	Unknown
Zakia 20 (W)	18	African American	3rd year (junior)	History & Secondary Education (BA)	High School Teacher & College Professor

Dissertation Pilot Study

It was crucial to make sure that the study was designed to achieve its goal, which is to understand the college choice and academic major choice of Black college students formerly in foster care. In preparation for the full dissertation study, I conducted a pilot study with three to five participants. The pilot study contributed to informing my methods and execution of the larger dissertation. For example, the pilot helped me test out the various approaches and techniques that are forthcoming. As this study intended to discover the experiences with this understudied college-going demographic, I solicited their input and feedback that they believe is relevant to enhancing and understanding their stories. Additionally, the pilot study assisted me in evaluating the validity and reproducibility of the larger full dissertation study. I used the results of the pilot study to refine and enhance the overall design and execution of the full study to make sure that the stories of this understudied population are accurately and respectfully conveyed.

Data Collection

Multiple forms of data collection were employed in understanding the college choice and academic major choice phenomena of Black college students formerly in foster care. The data collection process consisted of three parts: (a) demographic questionnaires, (b) two one-on-one interviews, and (c) student artifact(s). The two semi-structured interviews served as the main sources of data collection. However, they were mapped onto, utilized, and interconnected with the other data sources (i.e., demographic questionnaire, artifacts) which strengthened the aims of this study.

The data collection procedures (to be described in more detail below) enabled me to capture the essence of how Black college students formerly in foster care make sense of their college-going process. The data collection procedures separately and collectively employed humanizing and liberatory consciousness in drawing participants' college-going experiences. As

a result, the assortment of data collection procedures provided a comprehensive in-depth view of the participants and their multiple realities. The three data collection procedures drew thick and detailed descriptions of the participants counter narratives within the essence of their experiences. To honor their collaboration and time sharing their experiences, all the participants were given a monetary incentive (i.e., direct cash deposit).

From September 2023 to April 2024, I spoke with 31 participants from across the country, listening to their stories of survival and celebrations. The 60 different one-on-one semi-structured interviews allowed me to learn from the participants and understand how they made meaning of their complex stories of triumph. Unfortunately, Janet and Yolanda were unable to schedule/reschedule second interviews. Therefore, I was unable to capture all of their stories in relation to the research questions guiding this study. Although the interviews were completed over the Zoom platform, conversations occurred in a variety of places selected by the participants, all of which informed the depth of conversation, and identity formation. To be specific, conversations occurred in apartments, their homes of family members (biological, adoptive), campus residential rooms, classrooms, cars, campus, and public libraries. Also, I had the pleasure of meeting partners, children, and pets. In addition, I engaged in conversations with participants who did not want to receive the monetary incentives, but instead asked me to allocate the monies to other participants or to others in need.

Participant Recruitment and Demographic Data Collection

I emailed colleagues who are dedicated to improving the educational trajectories of current and/or former foster adolescents. In addition, I received assistance with participant recruitment from agencies that are in close connection with Black college students antecedently in foster care. In addition, participants were asked to connect me with other peers they may know that fit the criteria (i.e., snowball sampling) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once participants were

identified and agreed to partake in the study (by signing and/or giving verbal consent), I had participants complete a demographic questionnaire form (see Appendix A). This data was collected to help gain additional contextual information about the participants' foster care experiences, college choices, and academic major choices. All participants' information was de-identified, and they were given pseudonyms.

Participant Interviews

According to van Manen (2015), interviews serve a dual purpose in hermeneutic phenomenological inquiries: "(1) it may be used as means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and (2) the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience" (pg. 66). The dual nature of the interviews allowed participants to interact with me and share their counter-stories about the college-going process (i.e., institutions and academic major selection).

Two interviews were completed to get at the nuances of Black college students with foster care histories and to unpack their rationale for college choice and academic major choice. Phenomenology studies often contain multiple interviews (e.g., 1-3); however, two are frequently seen as sufficient (Roulston, 2010). Multiple interviews helped participants reflect on their memories to further unpack the essence of their experiences. Participants were invited to take part in both interviews by Zoom or phone. Students had the option to turn their cameras on or off during the zoom interview in order to establish personal boundaries as they unpacked their past experiences which contained both complex feelings and recollections (e.g. joyous, traumatic, challenging/complex). All interviews lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes, and they were recorded (i.e., audio and video) and professionally transcribed.

Interview one and interview two were semi-structured in nature. A semi-structured approach allowed me to ask participants in-depth probing and follow-up questions about their experiences. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to have open discussions with the participants about their experiences. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a phenomenological interview lens, which engaged participants in a discourse about the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). That is, eliciting more specific information about participants background, growing up, and their college-going experiences. Both interview protocols, (i.e., plan or guide for asking questions during qualitative interviews) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), were formed around understanding participants' college-going processes by being mapped onto the conceptual model of African American college choice (Chapman et. al., 2020). According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), using open-ended questions promotes knowledge generation by enabling a more thorough and accurate assessment of participants' experiences, which is supportive of a constructivist worldview.

Participants Interview One

In the first interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences growing up (e.g., life before and during foster care) and their college choice process (see Appendix B). Some example questions for interview one were:

- Could you please tell me about your childhood experiences and how you grew up?
- How and when did you first learn about college?
- What was it about your current institution that let you know that was the place for you?

Data analysis began following the completion of three first-round interviews to assist with the clarity and objectives of protocol. Beginning data analysis after the third one-on-one interview ensured that the interview protocols were set up to capture the specific aim of this dissertation. In addition, starting the data analysis process early helped with data management and contributed to formulating interview two's protocol.

Participants Interview Two

After the first interview, and in preparation for the second interview, participants were asked to bring artifact(s) that prompted them to consider their college choice, academic major choice, degree completion, and desired career paths. Artifacts were tangible items that spark reflections and memories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For instance, an artifact(s) can be but not limited to photos, letters, journal/diary entries, social media posts, newspaper clippings, artwork (e.g., song, poem, drawing), family heirloom (e.g., jewelry, quilts), and physical object that evokes a memory or reflection. No restrictions or limitations were applied to the participants' artifact(s). This was intended to encourage participants to be open-minded and flexible when choosing their artifacts. Participants who opt to communicate over the phone were asked to provide images or a video of their artifact that accurately depicts its entirety from all directions and/or angles.

In the second interview, participants were asked to talk about their college-going experiences (e.g., applying to institutions, selecting institutions, overall transition to their institution, how they decided upon their academic major, asking them to reflect on how their experiences in foster care shaped their college-going experiences, and how were their choices were affected by race) (see Appendix C). For example, some questions offered insight into the participants' understandings of their multi-layered identities, various forms of capital, and their

navigation of the college choice stages as outlined in Chapman et al., (2020) African American college choice scholarship. Lastly, some questions for the second interview were asked based on the participants' artifact(s) to better understand their college choice, academic major choice, and anticipated career paths. Some example questions for interview two included:

- In what ways, if at all, did your different identities shape your academic major choice?
- What was your first exposure, experience or encounter with (insert major)?
- What activities or communities have you partaken in/been a part of to help prepare you for your career?

Data Analysis

All the collected materials (i.e. demographic questionnaires, interviews, and artifacts) were used to analyze the participants' experiences in college choice and academic major choice. Several phases were used in the data analysis process: 1) hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and 2) artifact analysis. By using these various approaches, a better understanding of the participants' counter narratives and data were interpreted.

Together, these distinct forms of analysis not only offered breadth but also depth into understanding the essence of the college-going experiences of Black college students formerly in foster care. These approaches were selected to help center participant voices and highlight the experiences of the participants in this study. The collection of analysis consisted of both inductive and deductive forms of analysis. Such an approach allowed for the findings to be constructed and centered around student experiences and in association with empirically supported research and Chapman and colleagues (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis

As this study drew on hermeneutic phenomenology, thematic analysis was employed to delve into the essences and interpret the experiences of the participants (van Manen, 2016). More specifically, the data (e.g., transcripts, artifacts, notes/memos) was used to elicit responses to the study's research topic. Data were used to interpret and understand how Black students with foster care histories made their decisions to enroll in higher education, about choosing their institution and academic major. van Manen (2016) contends that all lived experiences can be beneficial for identifying a central theme in the phenomenon under investigation. In the analysis process, "we try to unearth something "telling," something "meaningful," something "thematic" in the various experiential accounts" (van Manen, 2016, p. 86). Scholars using hermeneutic phenomenology are urged to choose amongst three approaches that can be employed together or independently: (a) holistic approach, (b) selective approach, and (c) line-by-line approach. To unveil the college-going process of Black students with foster care histories, a line-by-line analytic approach was wielded.

The two semi-structured conversational interviews were analyzed using a line-by-line approach (van Manen, 2016). This type of approach is inductive in nature. An inductive approach identifies and elevates the phenomena in question by way of the data (e.g., demographic questionnaire, interviews, artifacts, memos) free from theory and current literature. Throughout this inductive process, sets of words and phrases that highlight the research questions for this study were assigned codes. With this approach, the counter-stories of the participants organically revealed the emergent codes that were constructed into themes. The interview transcripts were read attentively, line by line, multiple times, with the question, "what does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (van Manen, 2016). By following the transcripts line-by-line, I made sure that I was

conversing with the transcripts holistically and genuinely engaged with the participants' counter-stories. The first interview transcripts were read line-by-line to gain insight into participants' exploration of their beliefs about pursuing a degree and the procedures they went through to select an institution of higher education. In exploring the first research question, transcripts were examined inductively to learn more about participants' lives in the context of foster care and their decisions to college. For instance, when a participant shared, "I have to break the family generational curse, but I have to set an example." I was the first one to graduate high school", and I coded as "DECISIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION/GOING TO COLLEGE" and "FIRST-GENERATION" and "SET AN EXAMPLE".

As the aforementioned strategy utilizes an inductive process, I also examined the data deductively. In examining research questions two and three, transcripts from interview one and interview two were analyzed deductively. The transcripts were analyzed by van Manen's line-by-line approach in partnership with the conceptual college choice model. I focused on discovering various essences deductively that revealed the motivations behind the academic major and occupational choices made by Black college students with foster care backgrounds. Through analysis of both interviews, I drew on the participants' specific and unique experiences (e.g., gender, forms of care, number of placements, years in care, region/state, etc.) to acquire a better understanding of the phenomena in question. An approach like this was critical in acquiring an enhanced understanding of the college-going process for Black students with foster care histories. A deductive analysis incorporates the theoretical framework to illustrate the study's principal inquiry. Therefore, a deductive analysis process occurred by using Chapman and colleagues' (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice in further understanding the college-going process of Black college students formerly in foster care. This

model aided in developing codes based around the participants' racialized experiences with but not limited to state and federal policies, institutional and social context of higher education, family background and systems of support, and K-12 schools and school contexts. For example, when a participant shared, “One of my mentors went to [Puttin’ In Work University],” and I coded as “SOCIAL CAPITAL” and “INSTITUTIONAL CHOICE”. Similarly, a deductive analysis process supported the identification of important factors in participants choosing their academic majors and possible career pathways. For example, a participant shared “they [teachers] recommended me for AP Chem. And I think that's also what gravitated me towards that because of the intro courses I had seen in high school,” and was coded as “EARLY EXPOSURE” and “LINGUISTIC” and “SOCIAL” and “ACADEMIC MAJOR CHOICE”. The inductive and deductive processes both helped me explore the participants' experiences and offer much needed insight into the college choice and academic major choice processes of Black college students who were previously in foster care. The inductive process occurred only in interview one and it involved deriving findings from the data, and the deductive process occurred in interview two and corresponded with how the findings were consistent with current literature. Further, this intentional analytical strategy provided checks and balances of the data and identified areas where the current literature can be extended.

I used a qualitative data analysis software program to keep track of and organize the data (e.g., interview transcripts, artifact descriptions). Dedoose (2016) software was used to manage and code professionally transcribed interviews. I had the ability to review, code, and secure the confidentiality of all the interview transcripts using the Dedoose (2016) qualitative data analysis program. The software also enabled the storage and examination of large data sets in addition to providing a variety of tools for finding similar or matching data chunks.

A detailed codebook (e.g., definitions, inclusion criteria—examples of keywords or phrases that justify and/or fit a particular code, exclusion criteria—examples of keywords or phrases that do not fit a particular code) was created in Dedoose (2016), and I kept analytical memos to make note of my thoughts, reflections, and hunches of what I saw and/or not did not see across the students' experiences (Saldaña, 2021). For example, I took detailed notes on the unique experiences of the participants based on their gender and racial identities, technological access, institution types, academic majors, and a host of other factors that may have influenced students' college and academic major choice processes.

Data analysis started as soon as the interviews started. For example, once three first-round interviews have been conducted and transcribed, the data analysis began. The benefits of analyzing data as they were collected include that I managed the interviews more effectively and used my conceptualizations from the first round of interviews to aid in crafting additional questions for the second round. A similar analysis process occurred after three second-round interviews had been conducted and transcribed to make sense of the data.

Artifact(s) Analysis

Artifact analysis was employed to further explore the college-going process (i.e., decisions to pursue higher education, college choice, academic major choice) of Black college students formerly in foster care. Artifact analysis originated from the field of anthropology but has been utilized in other fields to examine the symbolism of identified objects (Hodder, 1994). Hodder (1994) asserts that using artifact analysis as a data source is crucial for producing knowledge. Also, in hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, scholars add that essences can be scaffolded through artifacts (e.g., unique texts, various art forms, journals/diaries, etc.) (Mobley, 2018; van Manen, 2014, 2016). Artifacts can offer extra details that are sometimes overlooked by conventional qualitative techniques (e.g., interviews, observations). Hodder

(1994) affirms that “what people say” often varies from “what people do” (pg. 395). Artifact analysis frequently supplements or unveils what participants say in other modes of data collection, such as interviews and surveys. Significant information can come from voiceless and/or mute sources (i.e., artifacts) of data (Hodder, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, by asking questions about the participants’ artifacts, new understandings and essences of college choice and academic major choice arose from the internal and external experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds (see Table 8 for a list and description of participants artifacts). A deficit model of research regarding foster care youth may view the objects around them as things they lost, or things that they have to replace in placement after placement, or only things they can carry in one bag (e.g., “trash bag”, “duffle bag”, “boxes”). However, the strengths-based approach used in this study aligns with Van Manen’s theories and Mobley’s assertion above, that the artifacts may anchor the foster youth in their multifaceted identities and could often help assist them in the turmoil to create resilience and courage.

Table 8.
Participants College-going Artifacts

Participant (Pseudonym)	Artifact	Impression
Alvin	N/A (did not identify an artifact)	N/A
Andre	Manila Folder	A thin folder with life documents he was able to obtain through a strenuous process about his 11 years in the child welfare services system. The folder reminds him of his journey and what he aspires to become.
Brandy	Framed Scholarship & College Degree	The scholarship she received from a Black Women’s nonprofit group in her community motivated her to originally go away to school as she felt seen by the Black women. In addition, her framed degree served as an honoree reminder of her grandmother who passed away before she was able to graduate.
Dana	Gospel Songs (“Worth” by Anthony Brown & Group Therapy, “Blessed and Highly Favored” by Clark Sisters)	The songs remind her that God brought her through so much and that God will continue to guide and

		lead her through the process of receiving her degree.
Darius	Pictures (e.g., his grandmother, great-aunt, mother, and him at the age of seven, daughter)	The photo of his family members motivates him to finish his degree and keeps their presence at the forefront of his mind.
Earl	Photo (best friends in college/SGA eboard members)	The photo represented a strong friendship that is still present today and their efforts to help students on campus and families in the nearby community.
Erykah	Journal	Collected motivational quotes to refer to when times became challenging and/or difficult in her college pursuits.
Eve	Photos (high school graduation, friends at college campus sporting event, study abroad in London)	The photos represent critical moments in her life that she will cherish forever (e.g., getting through high school, enjoying a football game with her best friend, highlighting her college journey thus far).
Faith	Black Khimar	Did not make a connection to the college-going process but identified her artifact and its connection to her identity as a Muslim woman.
Gabriella	Bucket Hat	Her first bucket hat, which she acquired at an Anime convention with her friends, reminds her of the group she is a part of and keeps her grounded in the significance of community, which has played a significant role in her college experience.
Halle	Photo (8 th grade graduation picture), photo album, high school diploma, wall decoration saying “with God all things are possible”	The items represented her resilience and strength through adversity and reminded her of her faith which guided her purposes through God to deliver determination to complete her academic journey.
Inga	Student ID, Stuffed Animal (Bunny her younger sister gave), and a song she wrote towards her mom	All three artifacts offered her a sense of accomplishment and gave her memories of her experiences and how she has overcome so many adverse experiences.
Janet	N/A (did not attend the 2nd interview)	N/A
Jill	Facebook post/profile picture (boss vs leadership)	The Facebook post was a reminder and served as a representation of the person she was and the person she wants to be as it related to her desire “to help people”. The post offered her a leadership paradigm in contrast with just being a boss.

Kimberly	Journal	Journalled about her daily experiences, thoughts, feelings, and memories. It was her brain in paper form and allowed her to express herself and her thoughts from high school into college.
Kioni	Photo (Picture of her and friend at a garden)	She and the friend in the picture made a pact to not let each other dropout and graduate no matter how long it took. They are still honoring that pact.
Lauryn	Watercolor flower painting (resembling a Phoenix)	This class assignment reconnected her to her purpose and feeling for art based on her life of experiences of shedding old things/ways to offer room for new growth and development
Lisa	Photos & Videos (events with friends)	The photos and video helped her understand and develop a sense of balance in social ways as a student. Dancing and enjoying time with her peers brought her happiness.
Lola	Medical Logo Image	The logo on her binder serves as a motivational tool that keeps her grounded in her interests, degree, and career aspirations.
Marlanna	Analog Camera	Allowed them to capture their experiences and be in the moment with siblings and express themselves in college.
Melissa	College Acceptance Letter & K-12 memory book	Offered her a lens to see what her next options were. Granted her excitement about her next steps (i.e., college).
Rashia	Camera	
Robin	Self-authored Poem	Wrote a poem about her adverse experiences grappling with numerous identities for a college scholarship application.
Roxanne	N/A (did not identify an artifact)	N/A
Sandra	Teddy Bear (from her mother that belonged to her grandmother)	Her grandmothers' spirit and presence is in the bear and continues to help her when times get difficult in school.
Shawntae	Book (<i>The Hate U Give</i>)	A book that was given to her by her teacher opened her eyes to new possibilities. More specially, encouraging her to go into education with aspirations of becoming a teacher and professor of Black history.
Teyana	Journals/Notebooks	She utilized her journals to take class notes in high school and college, define words as she was in the process of expanding her

		vocabulary, and teaching tools for her younger siblings who were following her steps in pursuing their own higher education pathway.
Toni	Undergraduate Graduation Picture and framed Bachelor and Master degree	The pictures and degrees remind her of where she has been and where she will go.
Trina	Senior Recital Music Book Music (in four different languages)	Senior recital reminded her of everything she had overcome, learned, and accomplished.
Yolanda	N/A (did not attend the 2nd interview)	N/A
Zakia	Award	The courage award for academic success was given to her by her favorite high school teacher (a Black woman). The first teacher in her life that made her feel “seen” and who she continues to currently speak with as a college student.

Positionality

In research, it was crucial to consider my positionality and researcher awareness. In hermeneutic phenomenological studies, it was essential to be conscious of my positionality and how it contributed to the interpretations of participants life world essences (Mobley, 2018; van Manen 2014; 2016) (i.e., Black college students with foster care backgrounds as college-going experiences). It was imperative for me to be aware of my identities, and how they were mapped on to the research process. As a scholar, it was important that I was reflexive throughout the entirety of this study. It was crucial that I recognized my identities (e.g., gender, race, family background, educational journey, socioeconomic status), in relationship to self-knowledge, and the ways they could affect how I saw and interpreted the participants’ experiences (Pasque et al., 2012). Therefore, I engaged in continual reflexivity of my biases, values, and views that I brought to this study (Bhattacharya, 2017). For instance, I took notes at different stages of the research process. I wrote down my thoughts, feelings, and remaining questions that may arise at the intersections of my own privileges, oppressions, and my lived and non-lived experiences. Even so, participating in reflexive practices was consistent with the constructivist paradigm that

guided this research (Patton, 2002). As a researcher, the constructivist worldview enabled me to legitimize some of my experiences to engage participants in co-creating knowledge. Pasque et al. (2012) emphasizes that such a notion can be both easy and challenging, but they maintain that it is necessary to counter the dominant normative ideologies that exist inside the academy. It was critical that I created rapport and trust with participants, as well as informed them that I respected their decisions about what to disclose and not share with me during the research process. While I shared some of my positionality with participants, I did not share too much in an effort to put their stories and experiences at the forefront of our conversations. Therefore, I provided my reflexivity in the paragraphs below.

I identify as male and use the pronouns he/him/his. My entire life, I have identified as a man. My racial identity is Black, and my ethnicity is African. I recognize that being a person of color may have both positive and negative influences on any participants I meet. It is acknowledged that being Black is not monolithic and that people who identify as Black live very different and complex lives. Racialized experiences have followed me and, unfortunately, will probably be ingrained in my experiences for the duration of my life. To name a few: being called racialized slurs, being called another Black male's name, being followed in and/or throughout the store, numerous encounters with police, observing women move across the street or clutch their purses when entering an elevator, being asked if I speak English, and being asked to leave places because others are uncomfortable. My understanding of race is crucial because Blackness is a key focus of my research. However, I remained reflexive and did not associate my Black experience with the Black participants in the study. It is possible that my own racialized experiences are similar to those of the study's participants. The concept of race could be used to describe both our educational and overall societal experiences in Black and brown

bodies. However, as described in the forthcoming paragraphs I did not have to explore race and racialized experiences alone or away from support systems that looked like me, which may not be the case for Black college students formerly in foster care.

I did not grow up nor spend any of my youth or adolescence in foster care. I grew up in a middle-class, two-parent household knowing my siblings and most of my extended family. I grew up in a stable environment but relocated frequently due to my father's military service. Even though I had to change schools a few times due to my father's military status, I was never alone during those transitional periods. Family and friends have experienced incarceration, homelessness, and substance abuse. Nonetheless, I am cognizant of the numerous privileges I have been given in my life. For example, aside from my family privileges, I have been able to complete many years of formal structured education (e.g., K – Ph.D.). While the move to higher education presented certain hurdles, as a first-generation student, I had support and the freedom to choose between various institutions to attend during my educational journey (i.e., undergraduate and graduate). The same could be said about my academic majors; while I did not have support as an engineering student in undergrad, which eventually led to me changing my major numerous times, I felt that I had the freedom and support to choose all my graduate degrees programs. I understand these attributes and how they could play in power dynamics, judgment assumptions, and various parallels for the participant's experiences that I seek to study.

Although I have held a range of jobs, most of them have fallen into the higher education and medical sectors. I have worked with many students, ranging from those in high school to those in graduate school. As a student affairs professional I held a variety of positions (e.g., trio program counselor, academic coordinator, Greek advisor, hall director) within higher education for many years at two distinctly different universities (i.e., Hispanic Serving Institution,

Predominantly White Institution—Ivy League). Apart from that, over the course of many years, I have worked in a variety of settings (e.g., different states, programs, and facility types) with foster youth. Throughout my profession, I worked with and learned alongside a diverse range of youth with varying experiences in the foster care system. While my career gives me some insider knowledge about the world of child welfare, I know that my professional experience is not comparable to that of people who have lived experiences of the child welfare system. Throughout this study, I participated in ongoing reflection on my positionalities and subjectivities that I bring to the work. Throughout the entirety of the research process, I noted thoughts, feelings, and any additional questions that arose.

Trustworthiness

To guarantee the study's findings are credible and trustworthy, several steps were implemented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 2013). I employed triangulation, which involves gathering data from several sources and interpreting it in various ways (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). For example, I collected data through demographic questionnaires, two one-on-one interviews, and artifact(s) analysis. Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenological approaches and artifact analysis were employed to make sense and bring light to the participants' essences of their college-going experiences. My pilot study helped shape much of the more extensive dissertation. During the pilot study and in the first few interviews of the entire dissertation, I asked participants about my questions. I asked if my questions were straightforward, challenging to understand, or harmful in any way. I asked these questions to make sure participants felt these questions were appropriate and safe in search of the study's aims. Several participants shared that the conversations were very therapeutic, that sharing the transcripts was unnecessary, and that they wanted to avoid reliving their experiences through

written words after completing the interviews. In other words, member checking was not offered or completed to respect some participant's wishes.

To build rapport with participants, we communicated via email and phone and had some pre-conversations before the interviews started to be recorded. During this time, participants and I engaged in further conversations about the study, how I came to the work, and my future plans or aspirations. Participants were informed that they could speak freely (e.g., openly, candidly, profanity, expressively, and did not have to hold back on sharing their stories or emotions/feelings). They were also assured that they could skip questions that brought them discomfort or pause, and could verbally tell me if they did not want to answer specific questions. When participants became emotional, I offered them space to regroup, reschedule, or move on to another question, showing them that they were cared for and their well-being was a priority.

In addition, after my initial data analysis processes, I asked qualified peer debriefers to review and question my interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). During these discussions, we engaged in conversations about my data analysis process (including but not limited to, the codebook). The peer debriefers and I had detailed conversations about my written interpretations and understanding of the students' experiences (e.g., race, gender identity, family background, K-12 education, foster care, college going). Going through this process helped center the students' voices and kept my experiences separate from those of the participants. The design of the research study, its implementation, and the steps taken to assure its accuracy all lend support to the study's validity.

Limitations

This study has had some limitations. For instance, this study examined the college choice and academic major choice processes with Black students formerly in foster care. These findings are not generalizable to all college-going students with foster care histories (e.g., those who were

adopted, and those that self-identify as another race outside of Black/African American). Further, this dissertation study aimed to focus on counternarratives from people across the nation. Studies that focus on specific states or regions may find different outcomes (e.g., states that have systems in place for foster care youth to transition to higher education) (Okpych & Courtney, 2017; Watt et al., 2013). Although the sample was national in scope, the experiences of male participants were limited. Increased representation of male participants would facilitate a deeper understanding of the college-going experiences of an understudied demographic. Lastly, this study examined those that already had some level of experience across various institutions of higher education. Examining the experiences of Black college-going students that have not yet selected an institution, or academic major might yield different results. Excluding these limitations, this study addresses the much-needed work of calling attention to the courageous journeys of Black college students with foster care backgrounds and delivering promising practices to help this student population.

CHAPTER 5: DECISIONS TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION: INFLUENCES ON BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS FORMERLY IN FOSTER CARE

The nuanced decision of whether or not to seek a college education is one that numerous individuals (e.g., students, parents, scholars) debate every year (Binkley, 2023; Chapman et al., 2020; McDonough, 1997; McNair, 2023). Navigating the decision to pursue higher education can entail intricate considerations, particularly for Black college students with foster care backgrounds who may face additional complexities during the college-going decision-making period. For many of the individuals presented in this study there were various reasons for their decisions to pursue higher education degrees. A new discourse is needed because of the dominant narrative that exists about Black individuals with foster care experiences only having unfortunate trajectories after aging out of care (Font et al., 2021). In particular, in this study, participants' counternarratives revolved around the phenomenon of understanding why they chose to attend college in the first place. This chapter presents the following themes: 1) “Honestly, School was Like My Safe Haven”: School was a Peaceful Secure Oasis, 2) “I Always Loved to Go to School. I Liked to Learn”: The Love of Learning Cultivated a Pursuit for Academic Enlightenment, 3) “Y’all Can Break that Cycle. Go to College. Do Something”: Varying Impacts of Familial Influence Often Advanced Educational Interests, 4) “I Didn’t Want to Be a Part of That Stereotype”: Education Offered Opportunities to Reinvent Themselves and Prove People Wrong.

“Honestly, School was Like My Safe Haven”: School was a Peaceful Secure Oasis

For some participants, school (i.e., K -12) was a safe haven. Attending school allowed them to escape their complex lives and adverse situations. For instance, participants Andre, Dana, Erykah, Faith, Kimberly, Kioni, Lola, Rashia, Sandra, and Toni share how attending school gave them a sense of peace, safety, and freedom from their turbulent lives at home. Faith, 20, a first-year undergraduate student studying psychology, one of the few participants who is

still in foster care because she is not yet twenty-one (as the state she resides in allows youth to stay in care past eighteen), has been in care since the age of thirteen. Before starting at a public school, she was homeschooled and rarely interacted with kids her age, spending most of her time around adults. Faith reveals the following about her thoughts on schooling:

It's like every time I went to school in the morning, I always try to make sure that I ate enough breakfast because we might not have gotten enough food or whatever, or I missed the deadline for lunch or dinner or whatever in a group home. So, it definitely really did feel like a breath of fresh air going to school. I know not a lot of kids can relate to that, but it felt like a home to me basically, especially, considering that I knew I had those two support systems, those two teachers that I could count on.

For Faith, the school was a place where she could be around other kids, feel supported by her teachers and could receive adequate nutrition. For her, school was a “home,” a place where she found some safety and sense of stability through positive relationships with her teachers, peers, and consistent meals. Two challenges often faced by youth with foster care experiences include food insecurity (Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2020) and finding their sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2020), and Faith hints at how she was able to confront both of these issues at school. As she mentions above, school was a “breath of fresh air,” and was a chance for her to exhale, and be away from the challenges she was facing outside of the educational environment. The same was true for Erykah, 32, who graduated with a bachelor's and a doctoral degree in STEM. Like Faith, Erykah noted her positive reflections about school by stating the following:

School was my refuge because I had a lot of support with my teachers there. We [siblings] went to the neighborhood school and so for them [teachers] to see a young Black girl doing well, they kind of gravitated towards me and vice versa. I just wanted to make them proud.

Placed in foster care at the age of six alongside her three siblings, Erykah asserts that school was where she felt noticed, and protected. Erykah's teachers provided her with a sense of community and validation, as she expressed, they shared a mutual interest in each other. Their support also

served as a motivating factor in her drive to achieve academically. She wanted her teachers to recognize her accomplishments and be impressed with her hard work. As a young Black girl achieving academic success, she hoped to receive accolades that she may not have received in other places (e.g., home, group home, foster homes). As her home life was often up and down, school allowed her to be grounded, stable in a sense, a place for her to be a child and an environment where she could learn.

Like Faith and Erykah, Andre also mentioned that the teachers at a particular school played a crucial role in supporting his learning. Andre, 26, entered foster care three different times (i.e., age 11, 14, and 21) and attended over 40 different K-12 educational programs, and he was currently on a break from his dual associate's degree program in political science and law. Throughout our conversations, he repeatedly stated his intention to obtain a higher education degree and pursue additional ones, but he had to take a break to "focus on work." At one particular school, Andre noted his level of love he attended by stating: "At that alternative school, I had a few classes that had actual teachers, and they were great. I loved it." The implication of this quote raises questions about whether or not the teachers he encountered previously were as committed to their work and or his success or whether he had a series of substitute teachers who didn't care about their students. At this one particular school, clearly the teachers were more committed to creating an environment where students felt guided towards positive learning outcomes. Since Andre had bounced around to several different schools, the fact of finding one school that he loved and felt the teachers supported him might have created an unconscious confidence in his self-efficacy. If one loves a moment of learning and feels successful at it, they may make decisions to repeat the same pattern because of the positive feeling it produced initially. More often than not, we move towards what we love. For Faith,

Erykah, and Andre, helpful and compassionate teachers assisted in their overall educational development.

Toni, 37, a first-year doctoral student at a PWI in the Northeast shared similar sentiments in regard to school being a “refuge”:

Particularly when I was in the foster home or my adoptive home that I was telling you about, yes, school was my refuge, was my respite. I hated vacation time, sort of like now. I hated the two-week break that we had from school. I hated holidays because I was saying, "No, I need to be in school because of everything that's happening within this home. I don't want to be here."

Toni, who was placed in the foster care system twice (at ages 4 and 14) acknowledged that school provided her with a distraction from what was happening at one of her eight different foster care placements. In the quotation above, she admits to disliking school breaks, especially evident during her interview over the holiday break in 2023. This sentiment persists. Toni wanted to be at school, one of the only places that provided her protection from the hardships she was continually facing in her multiple foster placements. Similarly, Sandra, 20, who was placed in foster care at the age of 12 and who attended twenty-one different schools growing up offered:

Honestly, school was like my safe haven. It was the only place that I felt like I could be me. And in the sense of, I was still hiding, I was still masking. I wasn't who I truly wanted to be, but I was still better than what I could be at home, so I constantly just went.

Sandra's quotation above suggests that for her, school was a place where she could be herself.

Although she was still “masking” some of herself, school was where she felt safe. More specifically, there was a piece of herself that she still kept hidden, it could not be expressed/or shown at home, or school fully. Sandra found that the school gave her a sense of safety within some of her identities or in a subset of boundaries—a sense of safety she did not get outside of school. Sandra may have been attempting to balance both identity socialization and construction even though the school offered her something she was not getting in other places. The school

served as a diversion for the participants and gave them some solace. For both Toni and Sandra school offered them some comfort and security. Similar to the foster youth above, two additional participants - Rashia and Kioni spoke about school as a place where they could forget about their personal struggles. Rashia, 26, a first-year student in her associates program states:

School and reading were a big distraction for me not to think about the things that were happening in my life. I would listen to music, draw, write, read, and all that. Anything to distract me from what was happening in my personal life.

Kioni, 23, a third-year student, and working towards her bachelor's in social work shared, "I pushed myself and used school as an outlet to get away from everything that was going on; trying to stay after school for tutoring, trying to get good grades...." From their quotations above, both Rashia and Kioni utilized school as an escape. Their schools helped alleviate the weight of their complex and challenging lives and provided a space where they could feel free. Additionally, they took advantage of academic opportunities that not only served as distractions but also likely contributed to their personal confidence, academic mastery, cognitive developments, and overall competencies. In the same manner, Dana, 23, found school to be a place where she could find some peace.

School was a blessing for me. School was my scapegoat. School was what kept me here. Outside of God, second to God, school was what made my day. School was an escape for me. If I couldn't go to school, I wouldn't be here. I found joy in accelerating in my classes. I kept good grades.....I loved school. School was so fun for me. I loved seeing people.

Spending six years in care across three different placements, and attending eleven different schools, Dana identified that school and God gave her strength, possibility and stability. The school offered her a reprieve from her personal life. For Dana, the school served as a scapegoat in a biblical sense, similar to the goats described in the Book of Leviticus¹. Just as the pair of

¹ Leviticus is the third book of the Bible and discusses a variety of lessons (e.g., holiness, sacrifice, purity obedience): See Leviticus 16:1-34

goats were sent into the wild to carry away sins and impurities, the school helped alleviate her burdens and challenges. In other words, the school took on the pressure and weight of Dana's hardships outside the school environment. As she explains above, going to school allowed her to break away. She later notes:

I remember when I was 13, I was so stressed out and I was tired, I was so tired. I remember being suicidal, but it was like I was never willing to go that far or do anything to do it, and I knew that it was displeasing to God and that's what kept me. I just was tired. I was so tired and I was angry.

It is difficult to process all of the intense emotions that one has a teenager, but this is especially true for foster youth who sometimes have challenges processing their emotions (Leve et al., 2012), the combination of exhaustion and anger may have overwhelmed her, but a respite of learning something new at school and/or being around people, or believing that God loved her served as another thought/idea in her head. Religion and relational aspects served as protective factors in the setting of her suicidal ideation. Conversations about mental health challenges including suicide were discussed with several participants in this study, as it has been an ongoing discussion around individuals with foster care experiences (Ludeke, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Her faith in God guided her toward various coping agents during those difficult times.

Dana, Erykah, Faith, Kioni, Kimberly, Lola, Rashia, Sandra, and Toni saw school as a way to depart from their challenging realities. Their perceptions of school and the disconnect from hurt may have unconsciously influenced their views on continuing into higher education. Enrolling in an institution may have provided them with further relief from the multiple difficulties and problems they encountered as Black people with foster care experiences. As their quotations mentioned above, the school environment offered them safe space, support from teachers, and connection to peers they may not have received in other environments or

communities. Furthermore, the continuation of their education may have brought them more stability and balance, helping them take breaks away from their various hardships.

“I Always Loved to Go to School. I Liked to Learn”: The Love of Learning Cultivates a Pursuit for Academic Enlightenment

The love for learning and knowledge was constantly discussed in numerous interviews. Participants shared about their eagerness to learn and how they found joy in academic enlightenment. More specifically, Earl, Halle, Inga, Jill, Marlanna, and Teyana describe their passion for learning. For instance, Earl, 33, a current doctoral student in education, who was placed in the foster care system at the age of five and eight shared, “I’m still pushing, a forever learner. I’m a forever learner. I’m continuing to just cultivate my craft and what I love to do”. Earl understands himself to be a life learner, as this is evident in his completion of not only a bachelor’s but a master’s degree as well. His quest for knowledge was a critical factor in his choice to pursue education after receiving his adult high school diploma and a trade certification in business office administration from Job Corps. Likewise, Jill, a current doctoral student in education valued the passion of learning as well, she reveals:

I love education, and that's what I learned about myself, as I went through high school. Yeah, there were a lot of courses that I absolutely hated, like math. It sucks. History, very boring, but psychology, fashion merchandising, English, I loved English. Those things are what drove me during high school, and I came across one teacher during high school that was magnificent. Today, I cannot remember her name, but for many years after I graduated high school, her name was, right at the tip of my tongue. It was her belief in me throughout high school that really pushed me to finish, and I think that love for education is what allowed me to be successful in completing these degrees while active duty, full-time, while being a parent of three children, while being a wife. I've been married for 22 years, so much of that was in active duty.

As she explains above, Jill developed a strong interest in education and/or learning in high school. Jill, who was placed in foster care twice at the ages of ten and twelve and a half has completed an associates, bachelor’s, and a master's degree. Her teacher instilled in her a love of education and learning and the belief she had in Jill aided the college-going process across all

four of Jill's degree pursuits. Moreover, that love of learning and educational advancement stayed consistent through her various intersecting identities (e.g., mother, wife, active-duty military, and veteran). For other individuals such responsibilities and identities may hinder a person from deciding to further their education, however, for Jill her commitment to education and learning remained steadfast.

Similarly to Jill, Halle explained her fondness of school and learning:

Just from what I can remember, I always loved to go to school. I liked to learn. I remember really... I feel like it was just this one experience that really made me like school, and when I really realized that you could just learn if you really put your mind to it. Because I really struggled at math at a point in time. And I remember it was this teacher that I had, and she was just like, quiz us and stuff, and I wouldn't do that good. So if you wouldn't do good, you wouldn't be able to go to recess, and you have to stay in and study or whatever. And I just remember her always helping me out and studying with me, helped me.

Above, Halle, 20, a third-year student attending a PWI in the southeast working towards her bachelor's in psychology, who experienced five years in the foster care system highlights how she also developed a love for learning from an experience with a teacher. As she added, "I just always liked to learn. I always felt good when teachers tell me: *good job* or stuff like that. It just always made me feel good to know I was doing good". Comparable to the positive experiences that Faith, Erykah, and Andre shared earlier, the same was true for Halle. Her love of learning was also supported by her artifacts. More specifically, she discussed the significance of her 8th grade graduation photo, a high school diploma, photo album (an assortment of photos) and a wall decoration referencing God (i.e., "with God all things are possible"). For Halle, the array of artifacts all situated together around the context of school (i.e., learning), the acknowledgment of her faith as a driving factor to help her persevere through obstacles and challenges presented in her life.

As Earl, Jill and Halle shared, for them there was a fascination with learning and developing academically. The same was true for Inga, 26, who offered, “I love school. I still do love school. I’ve always loved school”. Inga was placed in care twice, at the age of ten and fifteen, while her experiences were filled with obstacles, she completed her associate’s and bachelor’s in psychology and had recently applied to some master’s programs to further her education. The devotion and relationship some participants (e.g., Earl, Jill, Inga, Toni, Erykah, Sandra) had with learning and education empowered them to complete not just one but multiple degrees and have aspirations of completing others. Compared with her peers, Sandra, stated, “I genuinely love knowledge, I genuinely want to learn,” as she has future plans to pursue her master’s after completing her bachelor’s. As evident in their quotations, some participants enjoyed school and learning. These participants’ admiration of education influenced many of their decisions to seek education past high school.

Others, such as Marlanna and Teyana, were motivated to seek out educational opportunities because they enjoyed learning about a particular discipline. For instance, Marlanna, 19, a second-year student at a PWI in the Southwest mentions:

I think as far as school goes and my academics and stuff, I really like learning about science and especially the human body and stuff like that. Just that health sciences and stuff. I think is really interesting, especially just the idea of, I think science is really fluid and always changing and stuff like that, and I appreciate that.

Teyana, 19, a first-year student at an HSI in the Southeast highlights, “I like learning about math a lot”. For both Marlanna and Teyana, there was an early interest in learning about their respective disciplines. As this theme asserts for a few participants, the love of learning may have some connections to their pursuits of higher education. For Earl, Jill, Halle, Inga, Marlanna, and Teyana, their love of learning reinforced their mental stability. In this theme for some

participants, teachers offered a sense of safety and compassion that assisted participants in developing a stronger sense of self and academic abilities.

“Y'all Can Break that Cycle. Go to College. Do Something”: Varying Impacts of Familial Influence Often Advanced Educational Interests

For the individuals in this study, many desired to enhance their lives or create a greater sense of economic stability through education at the intersections of race, family (e.g., biological, extended/adoptive), and professional goals. Existing scholarship on college choice (Chapman et al., 2020; Freeman, 2005; and McDonough et al., 1997) emphasize the significant role Black families play in a Black student's decision to go to college. In this study, family consciously and unconsciously contributed to participants' decisions about seeking higher education opportunities in a number of ways: 1) “My Adopted Mom was Like, “Hey, You're Going to School”: Family Suggestions Have an Impact on Decisions about Higher Education, 2) “It's Me. I'm the First One. I'm Going to College”: Identity as a First-Generation Student Propelled Educational Achievements, 3) “I Want to Be a Good Example for Her [daughter]”: College Student Parents Are Inspired by Their Children to Pursue Higher Education, and 4) “I Can't Really Tolerate Staying Home Too Long with Everything That's Going On”: Separation from Family Challenges and Housing Stability Enhanced Higher Education Decisions.

“My Adopted Mom was Like, “Hey, You're Going to School”: Family Suggestions Have an Impact on Decisions about Higher Education

For some participants, their choice to proceed towards higher education was strongly influenced by their families. In our interviews, the participants relived the conversations with their families and the painful moments from very early ages that accentuated their reasons for enrolling in school. Although several families subjected their children to physical, intellectual, mental abuse, and neglect, some of them still highlighted the significance of education and the reasons their children should go to college. Just to name a few, mothers, fathers, grandmothers,

and siblings all influenced participants' college-going experiences. Halle, Janet, Lisa, Melissa, and Shawntae elaborate on their upbringings and decisions around their educational advancements. For instance, Lisa, 23, pursuing a BA in business healthcare administration, was placed in foster care alongside her other siblings, one being her twin sister, before reuniting with her biological mom a few years later, shared her reasons behind choosing to seek more education after high school.

Coming from a Caribbean family, I'm very much first generation, so that was always a conversation. I remember distinctly, even as a kid, my mom was like, "Go to college, so you get a good job, work for the government or the state," something like that. And then, so that you don't have to go through struggles. And then that order, every single time, every single time, school will come up every single time. And of my behavioral issues, I was a pretty smart kid. I got presidential letters, scholarships, honor rolls every single month from all elementary school to middle school to high school. And so, education was very much pushed in my home just because of cultural backgrounds. But as far as, I don't really feel like foster care really influenced any of that. There was always that drive and that push to do and achieve, which I can only imagine how that manifested later in life. But yeah, that was always a thing for me in my home.

As offered in Lisa's quotation above, her Caribbean mother initiated her college-going process. Her mom raised her and her siblings as a single mom, and always directed them to advance their education, as she knew it would give them greater opportunities for career success. She highlights that education was always important in her household, which is often a commonality found in Caribbean families (Griffith & Grolnick, 2014). Further, she asserts that foster care did not influence her understanding of the importance of education or her academic abilities, a position held by several participants in this study. Yet, the family and cultural influences drove her to be successful. For Lisa, her biological mom instilled in her that college was an advantageous endeavor to create stability. Eve had some similar connections to family influences as Lisa. Eve provides:

I grew up in foster care for the majority of my life. I've always known that I was going to go to college from a young age just because my parents were not very good parents, but

my biological mother was always very serious about school and always telling us that school was the answer to our prayers and stuff like that. I was always very serious about that. My biological parents were African, so my mother was Nigerian and my dad was from Sierra Leone. They were immigrants to this country.

In par with Lisa, Eve's biological mother insisted that education was important. Although from her perspective, her parents "were not very good parents," her mother made sure to note the significance of being educated and its association with better opportunities in life. Based on Freeman's (2005) work, Eve's decision comes from a place of strength as she is a "knower" or a student who always knew she was going to college regardless, and there were no other options. Both Lisa and Eve's mothers influenced their daughters to further their education. In doing so their mothers knew it would afford them a sense of stability.

Another participant, Melissa, discussed higher education as a way to create additional life advantages with her adoptive parents. Melissa, 21, a fourth-year student graduating in 2024 with a bachelor's in social work shared:

I would say I just remember her [adoptive mom] always saying, "You have to go to college. That's how you're going to be able to make it in life or give you more opportunities, open more doors." She just used to say how it was so important to go, make sure you go. That's all I really remember. I just know she used to just say... She pushed it. I kind of knew I was going to have to go to college. Because my brother went. When I first heard of college, I would say I was young. I would say I was like 10 years old because I had older siblings, so she would tell them and we would have family meetings, so when she's talking about it, obviously I'm listening. And then when my brother went to college is when I was like, "Oh, okay, so maybe I should go." So I feel like since my parents are older, they're like 70, they're older, so I feel like they have the traditional ways of doing everything. You have to go to college, you have to be a heterosexual person, if you're a woman you have to be cooking for your husband and stuff like that, they were that type. Growing up, I did have these values that I got from them because they were older and more traditional.

Melissa, adopted into a Black family at sixteen, learned about college at a young age. According to Melissa's quotation above, her adoptive mother frequently acknowledged that obtaining a higher education was connected to beneficial opportunities. Like Lisa and Eve, their mothers played a significant role in expecting their children to go off to college. Then, her older brother

went to college and in a way modeled the college-going process for her. Melissa's senior adoptive parents shaped her beliefs on college and various values growing up, Melissa's decision to pursue higher education was influenced by her biological (i.e., brother) and adoptive family.

Along the same line, Darius's biological mother, and Earl's adoptive mother served as influential factors in their decisions to pursue higher education opportunities. For example, Darius shares:

This part of my story kind of sucks, but I will try to answer this as best as I can. My mom had heart failure, which is why she's not with us anymore, almost two years ago this month. And out of my grief, I was just like, I've got to do something, I can't just sit here and continue to grieve. I've got to do something too, I don't know, not think about my grief. What could I do to honor her legacy? What could I do? And it was going back to school.

Comparably, Earl provides:

It took me nine months to finish that program [Job Corps]. And then I went home and I worked for two years, and my adopted mom was like, "Hey, you're going to school." I was working at a call center full time, and then I was working as a shift lead at McDonald's full-time. She said, "There's more for you." She actually did the application, helped me with the application, and submitted everything. She paid for me to take the ACT, because at that time I needed to take the ACT. She paid for it. I went to a college campus, [Let Me Fly University] for a weekend, one Saturday and just spent all day testing.

In the quotations above, Darius and Earl communicated that their mothers had been instrumental in their decision to advance their education. For Darius, he insisted that his mother always felt strongly about education, and once she passed away, he wanted to honor and try his hand at school again, as his first few attempts were met with financial challenges. Earl's mother advocated for him supportively (e.g., encouragement, and financial resources) to work and look beyond his current situation. Taken together, mothers consistently spoke to their sons, in the flesh and in the spirit (i.e., alive and deceased), about the importance of education. In an effort to

help their Black sons thrive in America, Black mothers encouraged them to focus on advancing their education.

Likewise, Halle, who wants to be forensic psychologist, and whose foster care experiences included kinship care, and a white foster mom, explained how family played a factor in her decisions to seek higher education as a possibility after her 12th-grade year:

I've always known I wanted to go to college. I've always known what college was because, like I said, I always did good in school. My family [mom, grandparents] would tell me that I'm smart and that I'm going to go to college and stuff like that. So ever since I was younger, I had it in my head like, "I'm going to go to college. I know I'm going to go to school." But really, how to get to college and all that stuff never got into my head until I got to [Southeast State], got a little bit older. But yeah, I just always knew I wanted to go to school, though.

Halle, like Lisa, always had a positive outlook and memories of excelling in school. Comparable to Lisa, Halle had family members who often reinforced her intelligence and wholeheartedly advocated for her to be college-bound. Her mom and grandmother reinforced her academic confidence by affirming she was smart and could be a college student. As Halle's grandmother's words aided her in her college-going process, Janet's grandmother's experiences inspired her choice to work toward several academic degrees. Janet, 23, who had been put up for adoption at birth, and who had been adopted by white women explained the factors that directed her higher education interests. She shares, "I was raised a lot by my grandma who was raised in the Great Depression. I had that mindset like, "Well, I can't waste this." In our conversation, she explained that she hated school and had no desire to go to college after high school. However, when Janet was granted some scholarships and thought about the opportunities her grandmother was not privy to, she not only graduated from a community college, but also a four-year institution and was in the first year of her master's degree program. Halle and Janet's decisions about attending college were significantly shaped by the white women who adopted them. As illustrated in the

participants' quotes above, mothers (i.e., biological, adoptive) played a key role in guiding their children's educational choices. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that mothers raising children of color, regardless of their own racial background, aimed to promote the pursuit of a college degree as a vital goal for achieving personal stability and success.

Shawntae, 20, graduated from an PWI institution out west and had career aspirations of being a teacher and eventually a college professor. Shawntae shared how she first became aware of college after watching a movie on the Disney Channel and the ways in which her family's background served in navigating her educational journey.

I always knew I didn't want to be like my parents. I knew that as soon as I left them. I was like, "I don't want to be anything like them." My first goal in middle school was, "Okay. I'm graduating high school." That's my goal. My parents didn't graduate. I'm graduating. Then, I got to high school. I was like, "Okay. I'm done with high school. I need to graduate college." Just to make sure I don't repeat their [parents] mistakes, that was my goal.

Shawntae, who attended ten elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school, explains what her educational goals were. She affirms that attending college was vital as she wanted to avoid following in her parents' footsteps. Watching her parents struggle with instability from a young age, Shawntae knew she wanted something better for herself and saw education as an outlet to create some stability. That is, graduating from high school, college, and working towards her desired profession. As family was a critical factor in most of the participant's choices to pursue higher education, Shawntae's higher education experience was slightly different from Lisa, Melissa, Halle, Janet; however, there were some similarities based on positive and negative familial influences.

As family played an important role in participants' higher education attendance choice and preparations, dads stood out as key figures in several participant accounts. Chapman and colleagues' (2020) findings also emphasize the relevance of Black dads in the college-going

process. Some participants asserted that encounters with their dads shaped their educational decisions. That is, dads' experiences and/or advice directed portions of their academic ambitions. Kioni, a 23-year-old, third-year student attending a PWI in the Southwest, who switched her major from criminology to social work, was placed in foster care at the age of six and then again at fifteen. Kioni had experiences across eight different placements and was, at times, split up from her siblings while in foster care. During our conversations, Kioni highlighted the role her dad played in her educational choices:

I'd say I always knew about college. One thing I can say that I did get good from my father was, he did push us with academics. He would always tell us, get them books, read, focus in school, do something with yourself. Because my father, he is very smart. He did have straight As all through high school, all through college. He was very, very smart. Just alcohol ruined him. Alcohol and marijuana, weed, everything ruined him. There were some days we would see the good in him. He wouldn't be drunk or he wouldn't be angry or anything. It was him helping us with our homework, him doing things like that. Because of that, school was always a priority for me. I wanted to do something and he always talked to us about college, "Make something of yourself. Go to college," because he didn't get to finish college. He ended up getting kicked out and then he went to the military. My mother, she was in college, but then my father ruined it for her by something he did, so she didn't get to finish college. They would always tell us, "Go to college. Do something better than us. We didn't finish. Y'all can break that cycle. Go to college. Do something."

Kioni shared the above quote about her understanding of higher education. During our interview, she recounted the severe abuse she, her mother, and her sisters suffered at the hands of her father. Despite this, she also highlighted some redemptive qualities, particularly his belief in the importance of education. As drawn from Kioni's quotation, her dad was a major factor in how she weighed the importance of education and its association with "doing something" and bettering her life. As she stated above, her father had a positive relationship with education. However, her father was simultaneously unable to overcome his negative relationship with various substances. In a sense watching the deterioration of her father and taking heed of his advice incited her to go down different paths than her parents, especially her dad. In a way, her

father's directions and his actions influenced why she felt going to school was imperative.

Another example, as described by Faith, whose experiences spawned across six various types of placements (e.g., foster families, kinship, group homes, shelters), emphasized how as child education was pushed upon her, and was endlessly reminded that she needed to go to college.

Faith, when discussing her dad as a factor in her college-going decisions shared:

Even my dad pushes me now. Since we're working on a relationship now, he pushes me to at least finish college, just to do that. It was basically instilled in me from a young age. I will say as I got older and I saw how my mother and how my dad was, especially my dad, I'm like, "I want to have an education. I want to graduate." My dad never graduated high school. I'm like, "Okay. I want to graduate high school." Made that a goal. Now, my goal is to at least make it through college to graduate.

She also added:

My dad, he didn't graduate high school, so he doesn't have that GED. I feel that's also why he's so hard on me like, "Just stay in school, stay in school, stay in school." I used to get so mad at him whenever he would tell me that. I'm calling you, telling you that my life is going downhill and you're like, "Stay in school. What does that have to do with anything?" But I definitely do see what he means by that because if you don't have an education, it doesn't really open up a lot of doorways. Now with that, I'm kind of very conflicted on that. If you don't have an education, you won't get anywhere.

Going to college and graduating was ingrained in Faith as a child and continues to be so as a young woman. Growing up and before her placement in foster care, Faith witnessed domestic abuse from her father against her mother; nonetheless, education was thought vital from a young age, and it remains a big conversation topic as Faith and her father seek to mend their relationship. Faith's father, like Kioni's, emphasized the virtues of education, and its possibility of unlocking opportunities that are practically closed to individuals who are non-college graduates. Freeman (2005) highlights a similar trend, noting that Black parents often urge their children to surpass their own educational achievements (see also Chapman et al., 2020; Squire & Mobley, 2015). From the participants' quotations, it is essential to acknowledge that they all lived very complex lives, which in turn makes their sense-making and choices just as multilayered and equally as complex. Uniformly, Kimberly asserted her two adoptive dads and

commitment to her educational success. Her adoptive fathers asked her about college when she was first placed with them, although she stated that at first, she didn't think she was college material, her thoughts on her abilities changed over time. As she shares, where she thought she may have ended up without being adopted by her dads:

I feel like I still would've ended up going to college, but I feel like it would've been a different ball game in terms of seeking validation from other people and looking for support for areas I didn't have it. Because my dad's did provide that for me.....I feel like it definitely would've been more of an uphill battle in terms of debating if this is something I want to do or not, or if it's something I would've ever done. But when it came to me, I actually did have that support behind me and I had that encouragement to continue to follow my dream to do something that I want to do. I'm glad I had that because honestly, I don't know where I would be if I didn't have that.

From her quotation above, Kimberly upholds that her adoptive dads provided her with support she had not experienced in other spaces while growing up. She voices the understanding that her dad's played a significant factor in her life, offering her a safe and supportive place. Our first interview was done in her residential hall, and her second interview was completed at home right before she was in preparation to cook a holiday meal with her dads over a Fall semester break. For other participants, dads played a valuable role in their educational pursuits. For instance, Trina's dad, who had passed away while she was a young girl, was a strong advocate for education, and she kept that in mind through her college-going process. For her, higher education was important from her parent's perspectives:

My big thing growing up, my parents instilled in me, education. You going into school or you going to the military, they did not play about education." But that was something that was engraved in me from a child, from even, I want to say, Pampers. They just, you going to college, you going to school.

Additionally, she offers:

Then with my dad being passed away, I was like, this would be important for him. This is not only an accomplishment... Because he did have his high school diploma. But it was like this is an accomplishment that if nothing else has to happen, this has to happen.

I'm going to go to college, a given, we going to college, but if I can get to graduation, I won't be... I'm saying this, I won't be a failure like everybody else. I won't struggle as much as everybody else because everybody else, they had to go straight to work.

As far back as Trina could recall, higher education was an indispensable part of her upbringing. Although her parents delivered the consistent message to her for several years, the bond between Trina and her dad around education weighed heavily on her college-going decision. Her father's belief in education and having his daughter become a college graduate was a priority that she vowed to uphold. Like Darius, whose mother had passed away, Trina also felt that getting a college degree was in remembrance of their parents who were no longer with them.

Halle and Gabriella's fathers also impacted their college-going decisions. Both of their fathers are currently incarcerated but have stayed invested in their daughters' college experiences and journeys. For example, Halle stated, the following when talking to her dad about going off to college, "I remember talking to my dad about it because I was really going back and forth, like I really wanted to go to [a Southeast institution]", and Gabriella shared, "I'd say he still has a weird obsession with calling three times a week. But the thing is at college I have terrible service, so the calls don't always go through.....But he still calls very often. He's always been super invested in my life." Taken together, Halle and Gabriella's quotations highlight the complexities of their lives across multiple systems. Despite their life circumstances, they found talking to their fathers a helpful outlet regarding their educational advancements and overall experience.

Even while incarcerated, Black men sought to stay connected with their daughters in various ways and remain actively involved in their roles as fathers. Such findings were also identified in Thomas et al. (2022) mixed-methods longitudinal scholarship examining Black fathers' strengths despite their incarceration experiences. Aforementioned examples challenge the

stereotypes commonly associated with Black fathers, particularly those who have been involved with the carceral system. Participants in this section offered that their conversations with their dads have varied over time due to numerous challenges and barriers. However, their dads continued to vocalize the importance of education and the stability that a college degree would create for them as they got older.

“It’s Me. I’m the First One. I’m Going to College”: Identity as a First-Generation Student Propelled Educational Achievements

Deciding to pursue higher education can be a difficult and laborious path, particularly for students of color who identify as first-generation (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Hines et al., 2019). Even more so for first-generation students who also have experience within the foster care system (Unrau et al., 2012). As fourteen individuals (i.e., Alvin, Brandy, Earl, Faith, Inga, Jill, Kimberly, Lola, Shawntae, Teyana, Toni, Trina, Yolanda, and Zakia) in this study alluded to and/or verbally stated, being a “first-generation” student was an influential factor in their decisions to apply and accept the invitation to become a college and or university students. Two participants, Trina and Yolanda voiced that they wanted to be the first in their family to graduate from college and implement new possibilities for their families. Trina shares how her first-generation identity influenced her higher education process:

I got to kick this up because not only do I have to break the family generational curse, but I have to set an example." I was the first one to graduate high school. So, with other siblings behind me, my brother, he went into the military and quit right before basic ended. I was like, "I can't be like him, because as much as I love him, you didn't finish what you started." And so that was one of the biggest things. I was like, "I have to do it for my family. I can't get this far, and not finish.

Trina presents that she wanted to break the “curse” she saw over her family. Not only was she the first to graduate from high school, but the first in her family to work towards a college degree. As a first-generation college student, it was important for her to complete her educational

pathway. For Trina, the decision to become a college student meant resilience, hard work, and a deviation from the typical trajectories and choices historically made by her family. As the college-going experience was for her, it was also an extension of her family and the new generational path she was constructing. The same was true for Yolanda who stated:

She [mentor] had asked me, "Well, what do you want to do with your life moving forward?" And I told her that I did want to go to college because I just want to be that first person out of my family to say I have a degree because I know that I've seen the cycles that's continued through my family, which is teenage babies.

Above Yolanda shared a story of a conversation she was having with a mentor while living at a drug treatment program. Similar to Trina, Yolanda wanted to free herself from the “cycles” she witnessed in her family. She explains that she wants to be the first in her family to have a college degree. While it is difficult to break the unjust cycles one has inherited through generations, the vision of and commitment to achieving a degree as a first-generation student appears to be one of the first steps in creating a sense of stability for not only just the participants but for their families as well.

Additionally, Toni and Earl discussed their initial reactions and responses to receiving their acceptance letters in the mail as first-generation students, further motivating their college decisions. Toni provides:

Oh my gosh. Undergrad, I cried and cried and cried and cried for hours. Oh my gosh. I cried with tears of joy because I thought about my birth mother and I was just saying, "Oh my gosh, I'm about to graduate high school in a few months." Because I received it [acceptance letter], obviously before graduating high school. I said, I'm the first one of my mother's children who has." She had not. That I know of, my father had not. I'm saying to myself, "It's me. I'm the first one. I'm going to college.

For Toni, receiving her acceptance letter while living in a group home was an emotional moment for her as she would be the first in her family to not only graduate high school but also attend college. She would be the first of her parent’s children to gain such an educational

accomplishment, as that same decision motivated her through her master's program and continues to uplift her to complete the doctoral journey. Toni's first-generation identity played a significant role in her college decisions. However, being the first in her family, she also had to find ways to maneuver her way through the higher education process, as she did not have any parental advice or perspectives to help her along her way, as other college students (i.e., non-first-generation college students) may have. The college-going process can be cumbersome for those with identities (e.g., Black, women, foster care) similar to that of Toni. Yet, her excitement and joy of being the first in her family to pursue higher education and be accepted into an institution was telling of her essence, adaptability, and survivability. Her crying not only underscored the hard work she put in to get accepted into her top institution of choice but also affirmed that as a first-generation student, she traveled through several oppressive systems to step closer to her dream of becoming a lawyer, and past that to be "the first woman, the first Black person to hold the role of the White House chief of staff."

Earl had a similar explanation about being a first-generation college student after receiving his acceptance letter.

I got a letter in the mail and at this time, I wasn't at my adoptive parents' home, but they told me to come in, pick up some mail. I opened it. I was very shocked. I cried. I was just overwhelmed with the excitement. I was not only the first child to graduate high school, but at this time I was the first grandchild to ever even think about going to college. And there was several, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. So I might've been the 12th grandchild, and I was the first. None of my older siblings, older cousins wanted to go to college, and I just felt so accomplished in that moment.

And he added:

She [biological mom] didn't really understand as I was the first of her children to even graduate. Even the first of my dad's kids to graduate high school.

Earl, like Toni, expressed how his first-generation status and the fulfillment of his hard work paid off in his educational pursuits and granted him the opportunity to go to college which aided

him in his choice to extend his education. In his quotation above, he asserts he was a child of many firsts for his family. Again, being the first came with excitement, but also underneath that bliss of being able to say he had completed something others in his family had not or had no interest in. As a first-generation college student, Earl had overcome the first obstacle for most students with first-generation identities, gaining higher education access. Earl's background, intertwined with his drive to be greater than his adverse circumstances, aided him in becoming a college student.

Then, Teyana, Kimberly, Faith, Zakia, and Jill's quotations suggest they viewed their first-generation status as a motivating factor, feeling a sense of responsibility toward their family and a strong sense of self-efficacy that pushed their decision to enter the higher education space. For instance, Teyana mentioned, "I think what also played a major role is being the first in my family to go to college", Kimberley offered, "I'm the first person in my immediate family and my adopted family that has gone to college", Faith shared, "I will say it was literally just from my family background, considering that I'm the first generation to attend college", and Jill asserted, "I had to grow up well before my time. There was nobody before me, that I knew at the time, that had ever went to college, but it was something I knew I had to do". Collectively, the participants above underscored that their decisions to enroll in college were based on their identities as first-generation students. Based on their quotations, the participants felt a college education would not only help their lives but also that of their families. In addition to Teyana, Kimberly, and Jill's remarks, Zakia puts forth how her first-generation identity factored into her college-going decision:

I feel like I set out for myself and for my family too because I'm the first. With that being said, I felt like I owed it to myself and to them to just carry that weight in a sense. They didn't have that opportunity to go to a post-secondary institution and pursue higher

education. I think that's what it was for me. I just felt like this is something that I'm called to do. I have to go get my degree.

Considering all the participants' quotations above, these particular participants share a barrier at the crossroads of a motivational factor. More specially, internal and external motivation factors are apparent from the participant's narratives above. Being the first can often be scary as many unknown variables exist. However, across the conversations for this subset of participants, there was an understanding of pride and determination to be the first in their families to become college graduates. They saw their college-going process as an opportunity to be trailblazers within their families. For most of them when asked what the reason behind their decision was to go through the process of becoming a college student, they suggested the absence of anyone else in their family (biological and adoptive) choosing to or having the option to advance academically, and changing the narrative was essential to their stories. Among this group of participants, there was a justification for them to light and carry the family torch to new heights, as many felt obligated to themselves and their families. The college-going decisions could have created some pressures and/or “weights,” but they mostly saw it as an opportunity.

“I Want to Be a Good Example for Her [daughter]”: College Student Parents Are Inspired by Their Children to Pursue Higher Education

In relation to familial influences, some participants in this study also noted that becoming a parent and raising their children influenced their decisions to advance their education. Other scholars have noted such findings in their work that being a parent often instills and motivates college-going activities (Huerta et al, 2024; Westaby, forthcoming). For some, that meant enrolling in an institution, going back to school, and completing their degrees. A few participants had children before their education pursuits, and others had children as college students. Alvin, Brandy, Darius, Jill, Kioni, and Yolanda offered their perspectives on college choice while

bearing children of their own. A case in point, Alvin mentions, “That was a challenge [being away from his children/going to school out of state] because you really ain't got nothing to send home. You ain't got nothing. Yeah, man, that was a struggle,” a comment made in reference to him trying to raise his two kids from a distance during his higher educational pursuits. For Alvin, being both a college student and a father were essential roles. He viewed them as crucial for establishing stability for his family and strengthening his relationships with his children.

Brandy, who spent some time at an HBCU before unenrolling and joining the military, decided to go back to school after several years of trying her hand at various jobs. She elaborates on how her two children influenced her decision to expand her education at a higher education institution:

Coming from a family where most of us didn't go to school, kids learn from experience. Because it was so hard for me to get a job in the corporate world, I wanted them [her children] to see that I was doing that and be the role model for them.... You have to have years of experience. They [jobs/companies] want you to be Superman. So, if I have to be Superman and still be Black and be a woman... I have a daughter, we don't have a choice. My son might have an easier time, but I really have to be that role model for my daughter. He has one thing in his pocket, but what does she have? You have to go to school. You have to outshine your white, Hispanic, Asian counterparts. You have to, it's not optional anymore.

Above, Brandy explains that as a working Black mother, it was important to model for her children that education is vital in today's society, and not being educated for a Black person is “not optional”. Also, she emphasizes that as Black woman she has to be greater than the other job candidates in the hiring pool and be able to accomplish supernatural feats. More specially, she emphasizes the need to prepare her Black daughter to navigate and defend herself professionally and personally, given the unique ongoing and historical challenges that Black women encounter daily. Brandy stressed the value of education since it promotes stability and plays a role in neutralizing some aspects of racism. Due to the loss of her mother at a very young

age, it is possible that Brandy saw her guidance as an opportunity for her to create something she did not have growing up. Drawing from her experiences as a Black woman and former foster youth, she is enlightening her daughter in ways she hopes will benefit her future. Furthermore, Brandy feels for her children to succeed, her daughter and son must be better than everyone else. She also adds:

Yeah, they [daughter and son] are literally the reason why I finished because I can't really preach to them that they need to go to school and try to get as high of a degree as possible if I didn't even do it. You have to lead by example. They don't follow what you say, they follow what you do.

Not only wanting more for herself but wanting more for her children, Brandy saw higher education as a way to guide them to more profitable futures (e.g., skills, monetary gain, educational and occupational achievement in an oppressive global racist and sexist society). As an older nontraditional student, her experiences inside and outside the classroom were vital for her to draw from as she role-modeled the education process for children. Moreover, her decision to enroll in college was also onset by her generational mindset, where increasing one's education likely increased stability possibilities.

Just as for Darius, setting an example and being a role model for his daughter was also highly important in his decision to go back and work on graduating with his degree. He shares, "I want to be a good example for her [daughter]. I can't preach about the importance of going to college, not just a high school diploma, but to college, if I'm not doing it myself." Given the significant influence of his family on his educational decisions, in interview two, he shared two cherished artifacts: 1) a childhood photo depicting himself with his grandmother, mother, and great-aunt, and 2) a picture of his daughter, both kept by his nightstand for "comfort". The pictures on his nightstand served as a daily reminder for him to persist forward in his educational aims. Collectively, Darius' college-going decisions and the pictures unwrap some personal

influences for him. The photographs of his family are salient to many of his identities (e.g., grandson, son, father) and his overall self-efficacy. The images offer a great sense of grounding in the day-to-day business that happens in his life outside of the picture frames. The picture of his grandmother and mother serves as a spiritual portal for his connection to them and their belief in the significance of education. Moreover, his daughter's image reminds him of his responsibilities as a father: to lead by example and prepare his little Black girl for the world outside. Further, from Daruis's quotation and artifacts, we can see that Black women are significant to him and play an instrumental role in his higher education decisions, even across different generations.

Leading by example was important to another participant as well. Jill, a mother of three, who completed several degrees, and a current doctoral degree advanced her thoughts around her educational choices:

I always want to attempt to lead by example. If my niece, my nephew, my kids can see me going out here, and putting in the work to get these degrees, I think that would rub off on them in a positive way to say, "Well, if Auntie can do it coming from this background, then I can do it too." So definitely my identity as an aunt and as a parent, played a role in that.

Jill not only included her own kids in the "lead-by-example" ideology, but she also incorporated her nieces and nephews as influential individuals in her degree pursuits. For Jill, like many of the participants, no one before her had gone to college, so by setting an example for the younger kids in her family, she was demolishing some of the same barriers and obstacles she and other participants in this study faced when they decided to endure their college-going processes. As a mother, an aunt, and Black woman with a foster care background she wanted to emphasize that, despite life's challenges, hard work and determination can make many things possible. She hoped to show that what may seem like a far-fetched dream is attainable and within reach. As Brandy,

Darius, and Jill assert, their educational advancements were not only connected to them individually but were also interwoven with future generational advancements.

The same was true for Kioni and Yolanda. Kioni's sisters, husband, and two sons aided in her college-going decisions. She shared:

I'd say just my kids. My kids and my sisters and my husband. Considering that my sisters and I, we went through [Child Protection Services] CPS and considering that my husband went through CPS, I want to be able to just be that change for us to all be able to see. For my boys, I want them to be able to see that they can do anything that they want. Mama got her degree and it wasn't easy for mama to get her degree. You two came out of nowhere and mama had to be mom while also being wife, while also being student. I'm not just mom. Mom breaks down into several pieces of I'm being the nurturer, I'm being the teacher, I'm being the chef, I'm being everything. And I did it.

In her quotation above Kioni, expounds on how her decision to complete her degree was influenced by several individuals. That is, her two sisters who spent time in foster care with Kioni in the same placements and split up, her husband whom she met at 15 and experienced foster care, and her two sons. As she had both her children during her time as a college student, she remained persistent in her dedication to her higher education decision and emphasized that "they can do anything they want." Kioni, like the other college student parent participants discussed in this section, was frequently pressed for time due to commitments related to their other identities; nonetheless, they continued to prioritize and consider their children as motivators to undertake higher education degrees. Just as Brandy, Jill, and Darius served as role models to their children, so did Kioni. As parents, they wanted to uphold the importance of education. Yolanda, who was also a parent shared how her children played a notable part in her higher education decision:

I've seen the cycles that's continued through my family, which is teenage babies. Teenage mothers having hella kids being homeless, drug issues, just mental health issues. And I just felt like I wanted to create wealth for my family [her three children]. I felt like I was always being told that going to college and getting a degree and getting a good job is how you will be able to accomplish that.

Although she was not currently taking classes at the time of the interview due to various challenges, she asserted that she was registered and scheduled to take classes in the upcoming academic semester as she added:

I stopped being committed due to the fact that I was having my own issues at home, like I said, prior. Just I felt like everybody wanted me to fail so I felt like my back was against the wall. It was either I had to weigh my options like, do I want my kids or do I want my education? I need my education to care for my kids because my kids are sickly. And then I have to prove to the courts that I'm even capable of caring for my kids. It's even harder because now I'm trying to show them that I could show up to a visit at seven o'clock in the morning with minimum of sleep because I was studying the night before and be attentive to my kids, play with them on the visit for three, because my visit's like four hours.

Yolanda, a mother of three, tries to make sense of her higher education pursuits at the same time as trying to balance getting her kids back who were placed in the system for various reasons. Her quotations bring forth her desire to not be like her family but also try to live between two systems (i.e., higher education and child welfare) as a single parent. She decided to pursue higher education to “create wealth for her family,” but continues to run into systematic barriers in the child welfare system. For Yolanda and Black women in general, living and sustaining in between systems is challenging and almost impossible (Roberts, 2022), as she confirms above. She was stuck between the tension of two different systems that were not built with her or any of this study's other participants in mind. Her experiences between higher education and child welfare created a living hell for her, putting her in a position to grapple between the thoughts of advancing her education to help her family or being able to reunify with her children. While education typically opens doors to opportunities such as employment for most students, higher education can also present additional challenges for college student parents like Yolanda, who, despite their efforts to improve their situations, often do not receive grace or empathy from others and little to no resources needed for success. Roberts (2020) asserts that child welfare and

other systems continue to harm Black women in such ways, especially when children are involved. Participants with first-generation identities wanted to set examples for others in their family; the same was true for college student parents. As gathered from the quotations above, in this subtheme student-parents utilized their pursuit of education to help themselves, and their children escape adverse experiences (e.g., uneducated, unemployed, unstable). Brandy, Darius, Jill, Kioni, Alvin, and Yolanda's reflections on their college-going phenomenon was based around the examples and opportunities they wanted to afford their children, a foundation of stability drawn from educational advancements and degree completions.

***“I Can't Really Tolerate Staying Home Too Long with Everything That's Going On”:
Separation from Family Challenges and Housing Stability Enhanced Higher Education
Decisions***

Going off to school for some participants was an opportunity for them to get away from their families and escape various family issues. For example, Dana and Gabielle saw higher education as a way to escape their adverse realities, similar to the participants who used school as an outlet or refuge mentioned earlier in this chapter. As in the theme mentioned earlier, a few participants saw their K-12 experiences as an immediate departure daily; the participants in this section saw higher education as a more permanent or extended way of evading the ordeals within their residence. For instance, Dana, 23, a third-year student studying social work and hopes of going to esthetician after completing her bachelor's degree at a PWI in the Midwest, was placed in foster care at the age of 12 years old after experiencing abuse from her mother. She bounced around kinship care between several aunts after having to testify about the abuse (e.g., brutal physical, mental, emotional) and living experiences she had to endure with her mom: “We stayed in a storage room before. We’ve been through a lot. We stayed in a shelter.” When asked why she decided to pursue higher education, she shared:

I always said I was going far away because I had communication issues with my family. They didn't understand what I was going through. I didn't understand what I was going through. I just knew I was angry and I was hurt and I didn't know how to communicate. When it came down to me really thinking about college once I was in high school, I said I was leaving. I was leaving Michigan, I was going as far as I could and I was never coming back..... She [aunt] wanted me close to home and wanted me to stay in the house still, and I wasn't doing that, I couldn't do that. I needed to get away, and I'm so glad I did because I healed differently. I was able to heal and breathe and have peace now. So, I'm super grateful that I still left in some capacity.

Dana, who also participated in the foster care support campus program at her institution, used her college acceptance and enrollment as an opportunity to get away from the pain and challenges she was facing being close to her family. Dana's choice to go away to college extends beyond an academic decision; it was a decisive step in her healing progression. Having experienced various forms of trauma, she needed to distance herself from her previous mentally and physically detrimental environment to begin her journey to some perception of recovery. Moreover, deciding to go to college assisted in creating a pathway for her to find her voice, as being comfortable and able to speak as a foster care youth was often difficult for her. This move also represents a significant shift in her ability to advocate for herself and prioritize her own needs—something that was difficult for her as a foster care youth. For Dana, the college-going decision and the need for separation symbolized a few different development modalities (e.g., healing, empowerment, agency, voice, courage) as her quote above suggests.

Connected with Dana's experience, Gabriella voiced a related reason for familial distance as an influential factor for deciding to go off to college. She was taken in by her paternal grandmother after encountering some unstable housing situations (e.g., constant moving, no electricity, no running water) with her mother. Gabriella, a third-year student at a PWI in the Northeast in a dual degree bachelor's program in education (i.e., special education & Pre-K- 4th grade) shared:

My home life, even though I'm home right now, is super all over the place and that's been stressing me out, too. It's been a bit much. But for the most part, like I said, while I'm... I stay on college basically most year-round, and I typically only come home for two weeks at a time because I can't really tolerate staying home too long with everything that's going on. And with staying on campus, I'm typically separated from all of it unless someone calls me and lets me know. So that's good. And I have that space. That's one of the main reasons I came to college. My God mom thought it was really important for me to get away because if I didn't, I would stay stuck, and she was genuinely correct.

As revealed by Gabriella's quotation above, her choice to go off to college was also influenced by her intending to put some space between herself and the issues going on at home. The choice to stay on campus almost yearly indicates a few things, one being that the historical obstacles faced by the family may have prompted Gabrielle to remain on campus, a possibly safer and more stable environment. The second, the distance from home, seemed to provide her with time and space away, allowing her to avoid and not be consumed by "everything that is going on."

Like Dana, Gabriella used the college-going decision opportunity to get away. As the participants in this section assert, applying and enrolling in an institution offered them space and distance between their adverse experiences. While the physical distance varied for everyone, the ability to be away provided them with some peace and time to understand their multifaceted identities during their college experiences. In addition to being separated from their families, those challenging and positive interactions pushed them to pursue opportunities to become college students.

Not only was separating themselves from home challenges important, but other participants conveyed that their decision to go to college was influenced by their need for a place to live. During interviews, two participants talked about their housing challenges (i.e., leaving their homes/out-of-home placements, living in shelters, couch surfing, sleeping in) cars all while trying to be a college student. Finding adequate housing is often a challenging and complex task for individuals with foster care experiences (Pecora et al., 2006; Rome & Raskin, 2019; Watt et

al., 2023). For some of the participants in this study, deciding to go off to school afforded them long-term housing opportunities that may not have gotten elsewhere. Earl, Erykah, and Teyana recollect on their higher education decisions based around the constructs of having and needing housing options. Earl explains his living arrangements after receiving his college application acceptance letter:

"Oh my God, this is the game changer." I felt a sense of security when it came down to having somewhere secure to live as I didn't... After going off to Job Corps and coming back, I didn't have a room of my own. I was sleeping in a cousin's room or I was sharing a room with cousins. I ended up staying a few months with my older sister over the summer before my transition to college, and it was like a little closet space, what have you. It fit only a bed and a dresser in there. I just felt accomplished. I felt like things was about to change for me when I got that letter.

Above, Earl recalls the excitement he felt receiving his acceptance letter and knowing that having housing was a “game changer” for him and his living conditions. The housing possibilities influenced his decision to attend college. Beyond that, having his own place provided him with a sense of independence and eliminated distractions like moving frequently or searching for temporary accommodations. Instead, he could now enjoy the stability of a permanent home. These concerns are often critical for students who have been in foster care because of their history of housing instability (Gross et al., 2022; Morton, 2013; Watt et al., 2023). The college acceptance letter not only meant educational access but also stability in the form of housing. Such support provided Earl with an opportunity to be a student with one less barrier to educational advancement. Comparable to Earl, another participant, Erykah found her decision to pursue higher education afforded her a place to live sometimes:

To be honest, I only went to college because it was a place to stay because I aged out. I didn't have anywhere else to go and I was good at school. I figured, well, when they told me you get a dorm and you get a meal plan at college, I was like, "Sign me up." And just luckily I got the scholarship.

After her first year, she had to use her survival skills find other options for housing, she shares:

I think actually the toughest part for me was when the dorms closed and during the breaks and the holidays, everybody had to leave so everybody would go home or would do certain things and I would have to figure out, "Okay, where do I go and all of my stuff, what would I need?" And all of this. There was a few where I would go to friends' houses. When I was an [Residential Advisor] RA, it really helped because I had the option to stay and do the international students floors or even sleeping in my car. It was just really trying to figure out and navigate those waters at that time.

Erykah initially decided to continue her education because she excelled in school and her institution provided housing and food options. However, that also proved to be a challenge as she had to “navigate” other housing options until she was able to become an RA which provided her year-round housing, an important factor for college students who have foster care experience. In contrast, housing options for college students with non-fostered care backgrounds may be which residence hall they want to stay in or what friend they want to room with, for Erykah it was a more delicate and yet complex decision, as she needed a place to live. When most youth age out or are emancipated from foster care, they often run into complications securing acceptable and consistent housing (Gross et al., 2022), especially for those transitioning to educational institutions (Brown, 2017). As some participants in this study acknowledged during our conversations, they faced housing hardships growing up, during their time as college students, and for some, even after graduating with their college degree. Erykah's decision to attend college was influenced by her availability to nearly stable housing. Housing considerations were an influential factor for Teyana as well. She offers:

Soon as I graduated [high school], they [parents] did not want me to stay there no more. They wanted me out. I was trying to figure out a way. And then Educate Tomorrow, I joined the program. Since I couldn't be on the [Department of Children and Families] DCF waiver, they told me to apply for the Homeless Waiver, or I qualify for a homeless waiver because, again, the apartment that we're living in is for college students who do not have a place to stay or anything like that. That was all my proof there that I was homeless or whatever to them. So that's how I got that waiver.

Without her decision to further her education, Teyana's housing circumstances may have been in question. However, because she was considered a "homeless" youth, she received a housing waiver from a state support program. This was beneficial since she did not qualify for a DCF waiver due to not meeting their criteria. As demonstrated by the participants' experiences, having access to housing and places to stay played a significant role in their decisions to work on extending their education. In their cases, college enrollment gave them a sense of stability by way of housing and various living arrangements. Transitioning from care continues to be a difficult task for some youth with foster care experiences, as restrictive housing requirements, the lack of affordable housing, and the challenges with navigating voucher programs hinder individuals from securing adequate housing options (Bell et al., 2024). Housing conditions could change depending on the institution and campus accessibility (e.g., bed spaces, cost, Americans with Disabilities (ADA) compliant). Some higher education institutions do not provide student housing or have enough bed spaces to accommodate their student body (Perry, 2023), which can be an extra obstacle for college-going students from foster care who want to attend a particular institution (Skobba et al., 2023). Erykah, Earl, and Teyana's decisions to enroll in higher education correlated with their housing needs.

“I Didn't Want to Be a Part of That Stereotype”: Education Offers Opportunities to Reinvent Themselves and Prove People Wrong

Furthermore, some participants saw their student enrollment as a pathway into new possibilities of identity reconstruction. Inga, Kimberly, Lola, Roxanne, and Zakia elaborate on how their decision to attend college was closely tied to the process of reinventing themselves and proving people wrong. Kimberly believed attending college was a means to distance the past and build a stable future:

All in all, I don't know, it's hard because sometimes there's still trauma and there's still, I don't know, I wouldn't say pain, but I don't know. I'm still trying to let go of my past and

moving on into a new lifetime. I feel like at the end of this semester, I want to feel reinvented. I want to feel like I've accomplished things coming into college because that was my point of coming to college, getting things done, making a career for myself, finding out things that I like, finding out things that I don't like, and just living completely on my own. I don't know, just inventing myself, reinventing myself, changing things that I don't like, do like.

Kimberly's quotation illustrates how she thought about deciding to attend her four-year public PWI in the Midwest. She used college enrollment as a way to reimagine herself. Because of her inconsistent educational experiences, she claimed she never saw herself as academically strong, but that all changed when she was adopted and enrolled in a nurturing high school. At 18 years old she described how she was still coping with her experiences growing up. She later adds:

It is really just the fact of growing up and learning to accept that foster care did not define me and who I was as a person. At the end of the day, I was my own individual. I was going to accomplish things that I didn't see other people in my past life accomplish. That was my biggest goal was to show people that told me that I couldn't do it, that I could do it.

As a result, pursuing higher education provided Kimberly with an opportunity to rebrand herself and prove all the naysayers wrong. That is, she wanted to reshape what she perceived people to understand about individuals with foster care experiences. Kimberly not only wanted to prove things to herself through her accomplishments (e.g., higher education, identifying and starting a career pathway) but she also aimed to demonstrate that she could surpass the limits others had placed on her. Her quotation reveals that she recognized the presence of more significant opportunities in life. However, her difficult upbringing in foster care effectively excluded her from accessing these opportunities. The foster care system is a carceral system that fails to offer consistent and productive developmental opportunities for youth, particularly youth of color (Roberts, 2022; Whitman, 2021). The decision to go to college helped Kimberly break free from the constraints she once lived in.

Much like Kimberly, Roxanne also wanted to use higher education to novelize herself away from the negative stigmas and stereotypes that often come with being an individual with a foster care past. Roxanne who as a young girl was placed in the system twice, at the age of 3 and 13, and experienced 13 different placements spent the majority of her life in foster care shares:

I want to prove everybody wrong. I didn't want to fit into the stereotype no more. I didn't want to be a part of that stereotype. I wanted to be more and rise above all of that. Yeah. The stereotype that Black, specifically just Black foster kids aren't going to succeed in go to college. I wanted to beat the stereotype that female Black foster kids aren't going to go to college and they're just going to end up on the streets selling their body, because that stereotype has been pushed on me since I was adopted because my mom [birth mom] was a prostitute. So that's been pushed on me for a while, since I can remember. I really wanted to beat that Black female foster care stereotype that I was just going to end up selling my body on the streets for drugs and stuff, because I was going to amount to nothing. I think why I pushed myself so heavy for college was because of that stereotype. But just in general, I wanted to beat the stereotype, that Black stereotype, just the plain Black stereotype that Black people are dumb.

For Roxanne, going to college gave her an outlet to help overturn the prejudices placed on her various intersecting identities. Having a college degree would help Roxanne break free from the individual misconceptions she was exposed to from an early age, as well as from the intersections of being a young, developing woman, a foster youth, and a Black person in general. Roxanne chose to pursue higher education to detach from her stereotyped experiences and identities. Her response implies that a dominate narrative around Black people, and Black people with foster care experiences remain in society. However, her decision to apply and enroll in an institution of higher education negates the white supremacist ideologies she witnessed and experienced firsthand growing up in the foster care system. Lola gave an analogous explanation of deciding to invest in herself and proceed in educational advancements in an act to step outside various stereotypes:

I wanted to mostly prove people wrong that my family's smart, they just didn't have to go to college. We found other ways to do it. Maybe not legally, but I want to be the first legal person to actually have a degree in something. Not just knowledge and can know

some people to get in there but have a knowledge and say, "Hey, I completed this. I have achieved this and people doubted us so if I can do it, I know my siblings can too, because they're smart. But we can still do this. Just because we was in foster care and people think we are not smart.

Lola, who believed in her own achievements, and understood she was more powerful than how others viewed her, emotionally expresses why enrolling in a higher education program was non-negotiable. She not only wanted to reinvent the perceptions around her family but also wanted to use her enrollment as an opportunity to “prove people wrong.” As a case in point, Lola knew intelligence was a trait she already had, but one that was not expected of her based on her past experiences in foster care. Instability in housing and family ties does not correlate with a lack of intelligence.

Inga, Toni, and Zakia suggest that their college-going decisions were based on their desire to recreate the biased societal image of Black women. Inga, 26, who had graduated with an associate's and a bachelor's in psychology, and had been placed in foster care twice at the age of ten and fifteen spoke on how the choice to enroll in college would allow her to demonstrate her abilities outside the dominate narratives placed on Black foster care youth. Inga contributed:

Even though people like my mom and my stepdad literally used to tell me growing up, "Oh, you're not going to go to college, you're going to have nine kids and be on section eight just like your mom." Blah, blah, blah, blah..... But I was doing what I wanted to do and doing what people said I wasn't going to do. I felt like I was operating off a slight spite.

Inga, who spent eleven years in foster care across five different placements, in her remarks above offers some insight into why she decided to attend a community college and a four-year university. Her comments above also indicate that she wanted to be different from her mother. She wanted to avoid the generational stereotypes placed upon her by her own family members. She acknowledges that she wanted to prove people wrong. A common desire for Black and brown students in education spaces (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; McGee & Brown, 2011; Vega et

al., 2015). Especially, this was important to Inga, who was fighting against the racial, sexual, and intellectual stereotypes placed upon her. Her motivations to succeed provided her with a feeling of purpose in accomplishing what she was told she could not do. Like other participants, Inga wanted to excel beyond the parameter's others had set for them. Put differently, she was in control of her own destiny and was committed to navigating it towards a brighter future despite any challenges or adverse conditions she encountered. Zakia echoed a similar rationale on what drove her to decide a higher education trajectory for was her. Zakia, 20, a third-year student attending a PWI in the east, working hard to graduate in 2025 with a bachelor's in history and secondary education offered:

I have to go get my degree and do something with my life. A lot of my siblings don't really have a lot going on for themselves. I didn't want to be boxed in. Even like growing up sometimes with my family's like, "Oh, you're going to end up like your sister. You're going to end up like your mother. You're going to end up like this person. You're going to be on drugs. You're going to get pregnant at 15." It was just like ending that cycle. And now, I'm an aunt so I have nieces and nephews. And I just think I have to carry that for them too. To say like, "Hey, you can do it. I did it. You could do it too." And then, yeah, I think it's emotional for me. I don't know how to explain it to you. It's just like I feel like I have to go to college.

Zakia, who will officially be emancipated from the foster care system when she turns 21, emphasizes her desire to create a life for herself, beyond the trajectories that she witnessed within her family. She overcame the narrow-minded views of family members to disrupt generational cycles, not only for herself, but for her nieces and nephews. Through her use of the word, emotion, she expresses the weight and responsibility she felt in her role as an aunt to set an example and role model a different future. Even through her various placements: kinship care, residential group homes, independent living programs, and a juvenile detention center because no other beds were available at times during her time in foster care, she did not allow herself to be boxed in". Zakia, like other participants, wanted to survive against the stereotypes that were

projected onto her, this coupled with her own funds of knowledge, she saw higher education as a must.

As seen above Inga and Zakia's quotations supported each other in their considerations about aiming for higher education entry. In the same way, Toni shares her experiences related to her college decisions made by Inga and Zakia:

At one point in time, being told that, "Oh, you would grow up to have multiple children by multiple children's fathers." Listen, I'm not condemning those who have that. Those who have that, that's not a bad thing. But the stereotype of it is so negative around Black women, and it's sort of saying the only thing that we could produce are children and children who are going to grow up to be in the system [i.e., foster care, prison]. I just knew that I didn't want to do that, and I couldn't do that.

Above, Toni accentuates the continuous biased societal assumptions she often heard about Black women. That is, the historical lens of Black women being sexualized (Cammet, 2016), rather than having academic aspirations. Further, she explains that often, for Black women, there is a placement of promiscuity, an inability to control sexual desires or make responsible decisions about her reproductive health, a failure to develop and a disablement for romantic relationships, and an inability to parent or create generational change to be an active parent and prevent their children from going into foster care and or prison. From the three Black women's (i.e., Inga, Zakia, Toni) quotations above, there was a continuous problematic ideology that seemed to be viciously and frequently placed on their bodies and assertion that they would become welfare queens-- a discriminative conception created about Black women during the 1980s under the presidency of Ronald Regan, which pushed the portrayal that Black women could be nothing more than abusers of federal supportive programs, poor mothers to their children, inherent sexual excesses, and laziness (Cammet, 2016). The carceral system that is the foster care amplified the harmful tropes placed on the Black women participant's bodies, and those negative social attacks are what influenced their decisions to go to college. By these women's voices, racism was

imposed not just by society but also by their own families. The endless nature of such encounters was detrimental to the Black women in this study with aspirations; conversely, the Black women in this section used the harmful experiences as motivating factors for their education decisions.

As this theme expounds, Kimberly, Roxanne, Lola, Inga, Zakia, and Toni utilized higher education decisions to carve out a path for self-reinvention and transcendence beyond the racial, sexual, and caste stereotypes imposed on them by society. The participants in this subtheme saw higher education as a catalyst to prove others wrong, hence, their aspirations of a non-stereotyped identity fueled their college-going decisions. In the same manner, they exercised and used their educational determination to contest the inequities placed on them as Black women with foster care backgrounds.

Equally important, participants in this study expressed how their various identities played a role in their college-going decisions. Since college-going decisions do not occur in a bubble outside of society, racial, gender, and sexual orientation stereotypes often attempted to interrupt participants' college-going process. Brandy, Earl, Darius, Shawntae, Toni, and Zakia expounded on the identities that factored into their decisions to further their education. To demonstrate Brandy details the following:

For starters, it really wasn't an option. First of all, being Black, you're already taken down a couple notches. So being Black and not having a college education, you're not even... They're [hiring/selection committees] going to overlook you before you even hit the submit button really good. It's like, you don't have a choice. I'm Black, I'm a woman, so I have to be educated. So, that was the main reason.

Brandy asserts that her intersecting identities, which are Black, and a woman are often oppressed and subjected to being “overlooked” in employment-seeking opportunities. Brandy upholds that without a college degree, Black women are often seen as unqualified and less than. She maintains that for a Black woman to survive (e.g., financially), educational advancement must be secured in an effort not only to combat racism but sexism as well. While Brandy is

referencing career pathways, her notion of being “overlooked” and “submit button” could have broader implications of being not accepted, accepted, and or robbed from moving on to the next stages in other basic life applications where demographics are collected (e.g., housing, loans). Zakia highlights some parallel reflections as a Black woman and how her identities assisted in her college-going decision:

I feel like it plays into it because the women in my family that are Black, I feel like they get stereotyped to a sense. Or put in a box like, "Okay. This is... Coming from the community we come from, this is just your options. Here it is. You're just going to be somebody's wife or you're just going to drop out, have kids, whatever the situation is." I think being able to branch out and say, "Hey, I can get a degree," leads into it.

Zakia expressed her understanding of not only her own identity as a Black woman but those of Black women family members as well. She amplifies that outside of being a Black woman that she can also have a degree, separate from “just” being a wife and/or a mother, and not be a “dropout.” Concurrent with Brandy, Zakia’s quotation spotlights another example of how Black women often have to fight against the oppressive constructs of society. As indicated by the Black women participants, holding a college degree often only gets their foot in the door, rather than fully gaining access. They must continue to navigate and confront stereotypes even after achieving a college education. Shawntae also described her commitment to being a Black woman college student:

Being a woman too, because not just being Black, but also being a woman, they also didn't have the same rights. They were only expected to be housewives and stuff like that. I was just like, "Yeah, that's not going to be me. I'm going to get my degree, and that's just it." It's not just my family that I'm trying to make proud, but also people who don't have the opportunity to go to college, to graduate high school. I felt like God gave me the opportunity to do both. I was like, "I'm going to do it."

She confirms that being “a woman” and “being Black” was central in her decision to get a degree as it would allow her to be something other than domesticated. Shawntae also discerns the degree is a representation of her family and those who did not have the chance to extend their education.

Moreover, Shawntae indicates that her identity as a religious Black woman played a crucial role in supporting her decision to move toward being a college graduate. From her quotation above, Shawntae affirms that a college degree would liberate her from the gendered typecasts often placed upon the female body. In addition, she credits God for blessing her with the ability to be prosperous across multiple identities. Shawntae asserts that with God's help, she can achieve success in various roles and should not be confined to or defined by a single identity.

Related to Brandy, Zakia, and Shawntae, Toni also reflected on how her intersecting identities as a Black woman influenced her decision to enroll in college. Toni disclosed that when she moved into spaces where people did not look like her, her racial identities became more apparent to her. She outlined, "I had the awakening of understanding that I was Black, but then the stereotypes became evident, and that was another thing that propelled me." As a young Black girl, people often made stereotypical remarks about her dark skin and natural hair (see similar hair conversations with Black girls with foster care backgrounds in Dove & Powers, 2018). Like the other Black women participants experiences, she chose to pursue higher education as a response to the policing and oppression she faced:

I feel like in some ways I didn't really have a choice. It was either understanding the identities, because like I had said, it became evident to me in 11th grade that, "Oh shit, I am Black and here's how I'm seen around the world." Because I was initially going to predominantly Black schools. The idea of me seeing myself as anything outside of Blackness, it wasn't evident for me until I was in a predominantly white school and I was otherized and I said, "Oh shit, here's the perceptions that people have of me. I have to succeed."

Toni unpacks how she gained a further understanding of her intersectional identities, which became more apparent to her while in predominantly white spaces. Prior to high school, she had a different perception of "Blackness" likely based on her experiences within her own community however, that perspective changed when she encountered the biases of white students. Although

her racial identity did not become apparent to her until high school, her understanding of societal perceptions of Black women, Black people, and dark-skinned Black individuals helped drive her scholastic activities. Moreover, in her college-going decisions she sought to prove people wrong and have a different narrative to tell. Much like, Brandy, Zakia, and Shawntae, Toni wanted to combat gendered and racial stereotypes often placed on Black women. Many of the participants in this passage, viewed pursuing a college degree as an obvious and essential choice, necessary for transcending societal expectations placed on Black women.

A few male participants in this study also felt that their identities shaped their decision to attend college or university. Comparable to the woman participants, Earl and Darius spoke about their decisions at the intersections of societal stereotypes placed upon them as Black men. In particular, Earl, who was in foster care twice, once when his biological father dropped him and his brother off at the police station in the late 90's/early 2000's, saying he did not want them anymore, gives further explanation to why he decided to go to college:

Statistics. It was hearing people, especially at HBCU, hearing them say, "These are the statistics of Black male returners that's continuing college or that are coming in as freshmen." Or that also sharing the bad statistics of such and such males. Black males don't come from this type of household and don't complete high school. Or we worked a lot with the pipeline from high school to college, or well, high school to prison. But we looked at it of what would those numbers be for high school to college? And the numbers was just screwed. I had a thought in the back of my head of, "Don't be a statistic. Don't be a statistic."

He also added the following when reflecting on his decision to continue his education past his bachelor's degree.

Also, there was a hidden identity that I had as a gay male that didn't surface until three years ago when I got into a relationship. But I also, being a social worker, I would hone in on when we talked about sexuality and how those statistics also, they were just... I didn't want to be a part of those statistics. So yes, I had the identity of being Black, the identity of being a male, but there was a hidden identity for years of being a Black gay male. And it is just always, I looked at the community and said, "Yeah, I don't want to be a shift manager at McDonald's. That's not what I want my to be." Or, "I don't want to

be..." I just didn't want to be the norm. I wanted to be the gay Black male that was successful with the own business that would be able to go and give motivational speeches.

As Earl elaborates above, several of his identities factored into his decision to further his education. In his quotation above, the dominant deficit constructs around Black men (i.e., not interested in education, cannot succeed in college, incarcerated) shaped his overall decision for his undergraduate registration. For generations, the college enrollment rates of Black males have not been comparable to those of their peers, as they often face increased racialized barriers in school and overall society (Brooms, 2022). However, research highlights that for Black males their decision to be educationally successful is often enacted by the desire to combat negative stereotypes (Brooms, 2022; Johnson & McGowan, 2017). This was also true for Earl in his college-going process. For him, it was important to work toward not being a statistic and distance himself from the things he saw and experienced growing up in and out of foster care (i.e., domestic violence from his father, no positive male role models). Not only are Black adolescents overrepresented in foster care, but so are LGBTQ+ youth (Grooms, 2020). His choices to extend his education in graduate school were influenced by his uncovered identity as a Black gay man. A number of scholars have focused on Black gay male students' experiences in academic spaces and the ways they overcame homophobic and Black stereotypes to thrive and prosper (Means et al, 2017; Squire & Mobley, 2015). Regarding Earl's self-identification, he acknowledged his most salient identity first (as a Black man) and then later mentioned his sexual identity. The order of his self-identification as a Black male and then a gay Black male adds a complex dynamic to the power he gives to his identities. As he asserts, his sexual identity was hidden, this could have been due to the separation of identities that sometimes occurs at HBCUs for Black gay men (see also Patton, 2011) and inequitable challenges and experiences Black

LGBTQ often face in the foster care system (Grooms, 2020). As noted above, Earl's college-going decisions were influenced by his intersecting identities (e.g., male, Black male, foster care, LGBTQ+, and Black LGBTQ+ male) that all collectively and separately deal with tensions associated with living in a white and hegemonic masculine society. Also, see Wallace (2024) for similar tensions experienced by Black men in engineering doctoral programs. Earl's tenacity was reinforced by his ambition to build an identity beyond the negative connotations that are frequently connected with Black gay men. He asserts that the experiences of Black men are often marketed only in deficit-framed ways, and no other narratives seemed to exist. In other words, his decisions to attend college were influenced by his identities and wanting to be greater than the expectations placed on him statistically. Like the other participants who sought to transform and redefine themselves beyond their foster care backgrounds, some participants' decisions to attend college were influenced by dominant narratives surrounding race and sexual identities.

Darius also acknowledges how racial stereotypes persisted in his college enrollment decision:

In this world, we already have a negative stereotype to it, already attached to us, and I just want the world to see me different, defy some of those stereotypes. And what better way can I do that by saying, oh, by the way, I'm college educated. I didn't just work in retail and all these other crappy jobs, I have a college degree. And I'd be the first of my immediate family to have that, so it would also give me a sense of pride.

When further asked to clarify what he meant by negative stereotypes he adds:

All of the negative racial stereotypes. I don't want to be... Well, I don't think anybody, any of us, none of us wants to be tagged or labeled with that, I think. I just want to be successful for myself and hope that when others get to know me or meet me, they can see that.

Darius's perceptions of how the world often sees him helped enforce his desire to get a college degree. He sees a college degree as a way to "defy" the racialized stereotypes (i.e., lazy, non-educated) given to Black people. Darius's identities together (e.g., Black, foster care, father, son)

influenced his overall decision to take college enrollment as an opportunity to create something unique for his family lineage. One important contributing factor was his first-generation status, which gave him similar possibilities to enhance his quality of life (as reported by the other first-generation participants). Another is having job opportunities that may not have been accessible to him before without a college degree. Corresponding with the women above, Earl and Darius sought education to be something bigger than the world typically expects of Black men.

Relative to the participants who wanted to prove people wrong and reinvent themselves, a similar throughline was presented by the participants in this subtheme. As the participants' quotations emphasized above, their decisions to attend institutions of higher education in a sense revolved around fighting back against the attacks often placed on various marginalized groups (e.g., Black women, Black men, Black gay men). These attacks are often rooted in minimizing gender expression and heteronormativity, so for example, a Black woman is not able to be something in addition to being a wife, housewife, and/or mother. And for the Black man, it includes fighting against societal norms that more often than not suppress their growth and development. In addition, it is important to pinpoint and question how gender played out in this section. For example, the women were often unprotected from various biases such as being Black, uneducated, unpartnered/partner, numerous children, and always dependent on systems and or men. In contrast, the males were subjected to a few constraints (i.e., race, gender, connections to poor or little academic aspirations interwoven with possible career trajectories). In addition, the male's biases were free of being partnered/unpartnered, being a parent, and or reliant of others. As this section demonstrates, women continue to encounter additional challenges following their traumatic experiences in the foster care system, yet they still push through and make decisions to elevate and educate themselves at higher education institutions.

Participants quotations convey that there is an art in enacting opposition against the racialized and sexualized constructs that continue to execute the minds, bodies, and souls of Black folks. Moreover, their decisions to be resistant have the capacity to reinforce their internal compass and strengthen their stability.

Summary

The findings in this chapter reveal that several factors influenced Black college students with foster care backgrounds college-going decisions. A select few participants identified that the school provided them with sanctuary and positive relationships (e.g., teachers, peers). Others reflected on their passion for learning and how it offered them a much-needed sense of distraction and direction. Furthermore, family (e.g., mothers, fathers, grandmothers, siblings, children) played a crucial role in the college decisions of some participants in various ways. The appeal of a few participants to reinvent themselves and prove others wrong influenced their decisions regarding higher education. Beyond that, the necessity of secure and sufficient housing dictated some college-going choices. Lastly, intertwined with these influential factors, different aspects of the participants' identities also shaped their decisions to pursue further education.

CHAPTER 6: NAVIGATING HIGHER EDUCATION: FACTORS INFLUENCING BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH FOSTER CARE BACKGROUNDS IN CHOOSING INSTITUTIONS

For many participants, the decision to pursue higher education was motivated by a desire to obtain stability for themselves and future generations. In other words, the participants wanted to create circumstances that differed from the environments (e.g., low socioeconomic status, debt, inconsistent employment, unstable housing) that they had endured while growing up in foster care. The participants' commitment to the construction of stability influenced each of their decisions- to attend higher education, which institution and which particular major. Thus, this commitment was not easy to maintain, as they often found themselves at the crossroads of racial and social/economic systemic struggles, compounded by the daily disadvantages that existed from living in this oppressive society. Participants chose institutions that offered them a substantial financial aid package, were geographically close to their families and romantic partners, were recommended by alums of the institution, and institutions that included participants' academic program choice. This chapter's findings were constructed by examining the participants' experiences using Chapmans and colleague's (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice. That is the various elements (i.e., family and support systems, K-12 education, institutional contexts, state and federal policies) of the model were taken into account individually and synchronically for the themes. To further understand the essence of participants' decisions to seek to choose specific institutions of higher education across a national scope. Thus, this chapter highlights the following themes: 1) “What I was Really Interested In was the Free Money”: Funding Options by Institution Type Dictate Institutional Choice, 2) “She Said, “Apply.” I Applied”: Relationships and Proximity to Institutions Shape Institutional

Choices, 3) “I Just Googled Colleges that Had the Major that I Wanted”: Availability of Academic Majors and Support Programs Influence on College Choice.

Table 9.
Participant Institution Region Location

Higher Education Institution U.S. Region Location					
Eastern	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	West	Midwest
Brandy	Faith	Alvin*	Eve	Lisa	Alvin*
Darius	Gabriella	Earl	Kioni	Robin	Andre
Jill	Toni	Halle	Marlanna	Shawntae	Dana
Zakia		Lauryn		Yolanda	Erykah
		Lola			Inga
		Teyana			Janet
		Trina			Kimberly
					Melissa
					Rashia
					Roxanne
					Sandra

*Attended more than one institution in a different U.S. region

“What I was Really Interested In was the Free Money”: Funding Options by Institution Type Dictate Institutional Choice

A higher education degree frequently necessitates significant financial sacrifice (Chapman et al., 2020). Consequently, during the institutional choice process, students frequently analyze the funding options that are accessible to them (Clayton et al., 2023; Freeman & Brown, 2005; McDonough, 1997). State and federal economic considerations are a major factor for Black students when deciding on an institution of higher education, especially institutional options that lead to little to no debt (Chapman et al., 2020). In addition, they declare that institutional and social context can sometimes be paired with state and federal policies when discussing available aid to students. For Black college students who have experienced foster care, there is some parallel to their peers in regard to needing institutional funding to support education aspirations (Smith et al., 2015; Stone, 2024). Based on the findings from this study, choosing an institution that provided a substantial financial package was beneficial for participants who had experienced various forms of instability prior to attending their selected institution. Accessible finances significantly influenced students' choices across different

institutions. Such choices often helped some participants avoid additional financial complications as college students, which offered them a sense of stability. The following themes emerged: 1) “I Didn't Have to Pay Nothing”: How Scholarships Shaped Students' Choice of Community College, 2) “I Got My Whole College Paid For”: The Role of Financial Aid in Choosing PWIs, and 3) “I Knew That It Was Going to Be Hard to Get There and Pay for It”: Limited Funding Affects the Decision to Attend HBCUs.

“I Didn't Have to Pay Nothing”: How Scholarships Shaped Students' Choice of Community College

Likewise, the availability of funding played a crucial role for students (i.e., Andre, Robin, Lola) who opted to attend community colleges, influencing their choice of institution. For the participants, community colleges presented unique opportunities to advance their education that were not available at other institutions during that particular stage of their college journey. For instance, Andre applied to a range of schools, from state universities to prestigious institutions like Harvard and Juilliard; with talents spanning 27 different instruments, along with his skills in singing, writing, and composing music, outside of these institutions, he also considered the local community college as an option. Andre spoke on how scholarships influenced his institutional choice to attend a community college, he offered:

I was going to make it out; it was how I was going to make it out. And I was holding out hope, I didn't know if I could get into Harvard. They give out special scholarships. I was just like, I don't know what the future brings, but I'm trying. I'm going to put in the effort. I got multiple scholarships. I got a scholarship to the community college, in addition to my program and other community-based scholarships, and foundation scholarships.

Andre's quote above highlights his enthusiasm for education and underscores his confidence in his ability to transcend challenging circumstances, such as his involvement in and out of youth services since the age of 13. He did not allow his past to decide his future. He applied to a range of institutions, from prestigious Ivy League universities to community colleges, in an effort to

“make it out” of the adverse experiences he had endured for so long. Based on Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth scholarship, Andre utilized aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital to carve away for himself the experience of being a college student. Despite applying to a variety of schools, Andre was ultimately accepted to a community college that provided him with funding opportunities, and he was able to utilize state-funded aid to further his education at the community college. In our conversation, Andre shared that his ultimate goal is to transfer to a four-year university after receiving his associate's degree and pursue his bachelor's, master's, and PhD degrees. This future thinking contributes to the understanding of his aspirational capital, or as Wang et al. (2018) assert as the “warming up” tendencies some Black males experience as they start their educational careers at community colleges and begin moving forward in their social and economic mobility. For Andre, this increased his chances of establishing a sense of stability for himself and his future family.

Robin is a 23-year-old biracial (Black & Asian) woman, who spent 18 years in the foster care system and lived in various types of placements (i.e., kinship care with her aunt, white and Hispanic foster families, residential group homes, and therapeutic care facilities). During our conversations, she shared her experiences about attending four different institutions. Within these conversations, she explained how she decided to transfer to a community college based on the funding she received:

The school district was paying for my two years in community college. I took three classes, but that was the first two years. It was two classes per quarter, which is about three months, and then that one quarter was three classes, and then I finally passed. I have the brains, and I honestly was a Presidential Scholar. I worked for the school, but, for the most part, I got grants. I got all the grants then I paid out of pocket, and then the rest was student loans.

Robin acknowledges that transferring to the community college was advantageous due to the financial support she received, which was lacking at her previous institution. She explained that

her initial college experience was challenging due to several barriers, including insufficient funding. The financial support from the community college allowed her to concentrate on her studies, providing the economic stability necessary for academic focus. However, despite receiving financial aid during the first few years, changing life circumstances required her to allocate funds for essential needs like food and housing, leading her to work and take out loans. Finding funding for higher education is not always straightforward, but Robin was able to secure some funds to continue her studies courtesy of her navigational capital. Paired with her quotation above, Robin's artifact, a poem written for a college scholarship, portrays the long journey of a young biracial Muslim woman who endured many years of abuse trying to uplift her stolen voice. She also makes sense of her intersectional identities while alchemizing the challenging experiences that have shaped her personality today. When asked about her favorite line in the poem, she offered:

“I am my ethnicity; that doesn't qualify me for sex work
my empowered spirit doesn't crave attention from objective
statements I am a fighter who resists little pharaohs and big
policies my voice leaves quivering aside, for the world is my
fortress.”

Her decision to attend a community college was influenced by the financial aid available to her, such as scholarships and grants. Although her initial institution experience was financially supported, her subsequent enrollments were not as financially advantageous. Aspirational, navigational, and resistance capital were all employed by Robin in the composition of the poem she turned in for a college scholarship. Through her poem, she describes how she sees herself as greater than what society has framed her to be. Even in the midst of this, she was able to maneuver her way through difficult situations and not allow society's standards to use her mind and/or body in oppressive ways. As highlighted in her poem, her college experience has been

marred by unwanted sexual advances, and she believes that pursuing education should not come at the expense of having to trade her body to afford the steep cost of tuition. Robin had been admitted to numerous universities, but she chose to attend a community college because it provided financial security for her educational ambitions. Many students of color make this decision while looking for educational possibilities, as community colleges frequently provide lower tuition and a less crowded environment than larger institutions, where students can get lost in the daily shuffle of campus.

Lola, like other students, chose a community college that provided her with the most favorable financial circumstances immediately following high school. Lola, a 26-year-old in her second year studying phlebotomy, who was adopted by her single white adoptive mother at the age of 13, shared:

Well, the first one is because I didn't pay nothing. I didn't have to pay nothing to go to community college. I went to college right after high school because I had to, but I couldn't go to any colleges I wanted because my sister who was same age as me wanted to go out of state. She said that's more expensive. I've been the bigger person. Okay, I'll go to the community college a little bit cheaper. I don't have to pay for it, you can just focus on her. She was more of an honor student, so I was like, okay, I could sacrifice less spending so she can go do what she needs to do.

In the quotation above, Lola offers us a glimpse into her institutional choices based on two financial parameters. The community college provided her with the opportunity to receive a free education, and her decision to attend such an institution allowed her sister (i.e., adoptive sister) to explore her institutional choices; combined, these experiences provided Lola with a stronger sense of stability, that not only extended to her but to her adoptive family as well. While she eventually attended a community college, her quote also expresses how she felt about her academic paths in comparison to her sister's status as an "honor student," which may have a deeper meaning in terms of who can/should attend community colleges in comparison to other

educational institutions. Lola's understanding of making a sacrifice for her sister in this case appears to be a pattern in the family. The honor student sister has more freedom to select colleges and her selection impacts Lola's institutional choices. Setting aside her own educational goals for her sister demonstrates how Lola's decisions were influenced by her familial capital. Chapman et al., (2020) found similar results (i.e., educational sacrifices for a sibling) in their study examining Black student's college choices. Collectively, Andre, Robin, and Lola all decided to attend community colleges based upon the financial packages afforded thus offering them a sense of stability.

While financial help was important for the individuals who attended community colleges, their experiences also revealed the complexities of their academic major selections. The three individuals mentioned above, as well as other study participants, went to community colleges with specific majors in mind, but they frequently changed their minds or explored other academic programs along the way. Andrea, Sandra, and Lola had been students at other institutions over several years, had taken on employment opportunities, and all had taken time away from their course enrollments at some point. However, they were all looking forward to graduating from their respective institutions within the coming years.

“I Got My Whole College Paid For”: The Role of Financial Aid in Choosing PWIs

Participants Eve, Shawntae, and Roxanne further explained their institutional choices based on the financial packages provided at PWIs. For example, Eve, a third-year undergraduate student pursuing a bachelor's degree in business and applied technology, who spent six years in foster care before being adopted by a white couple at the age of 16, clarified her reasoning for selecting an instate school compared to an out-of-state institution:

My choice of going to [Queen of Hearts University: 4-year Public Southwest Institution], was just because it was in-state. I was going to get the proper amount of

funding to go so I wouldn't have to pay for it. That was a no-brainer to me. At first, I wanted to go out of state, but I knew about taking out student loans and stuff like that and how bad it is. Not how bad it is, but how it's really hard to pay off the loans when you get the loan, how it could trap you and stuff like that with all the interest, and stuff like that. I remember I actually had a conversation with my mom; I said I wanted to go to school in New York. I was like, "Oh, I really want to go to school in New York." She kind of shut that down, my adoptive mom now. She was kind of like, "How are you going to pay for it? How are you going to pay for the loans? If you stay here, they're going to pay for a school. Trust me, you don't want to take out loans. I'm a lawyer. I took out loans. I still have to pay in loans every single month."

Eve's quotation above highlights her decision-making process in selecting which school to attend. By selecting an in-state school, Eve was able to avoid having to take out loans to pursue her education. By having conversations with her adoptive mother, Eve knew a great deal about loans and the harm they could cause to students; which is often not the case for college students with foster care histories. Eve's conversation with her adoptive mom influenced her thoughts on which institution to attend. Yosso (2005) asserts that relationships with family often help shape an individual's consciousness in various forms, such as emotional, educational, cultural, moral, and occupational. Usually, youth with foster care experiences are unaware of the free financial services available to them (e.g., grants, tuition waivers) and unfamiliar with the unjust financial tactics and exploitation often placed upon them by government loaning agencies (Gross, 2019; Lane, 2022). While loans may represent the sole resource for specific students, individuals striving for upward educational mobility should endeavor to minimize reliance on loans whenever possible, because paying them back may impact the dream of financial stability. Eve and others opted for institutions that allowed them to pursue their education without accumulating debt. For instance, Shawntae, who recently earned a bachelor's degree in education studies with a history focus, was placed in kinship care with her aunt and uncle at the age of twelve years old, and who shared one of her deciding factors that ultimately led her to select a PWI:

I applied to 10 schools, and I got into all of them. I think what got me to go to [What'Chu Like] was that, like I said earlier I got grants, and scholarships, and stuff.....I ended up just going to [What'Chu Like], and I got my whole college paid for. I didn't have to pay anything out of pocket. So that was the big factor that really said, "Okay, you're going to [What'Chu Like]."

Shawntae's comment above underlines how crucial scholarships and grants were in helping her decide which institution to attend. It is also essential to note that the type of funding Shawntae obtained enabled her to pursue an educational opportunity that may not have been available otherwise. She narrowed down her numerous acceptances to the institution that could provide her with the most substantial financial package so that she could attend and graduate debt-free. Shawntae utilized a significant amount of navigational capital, that is, skillfully maneuvering through the challenges of the college-going process (e.g., institutional choice), which is often structured with injustices and saturated by racism and sexism. Yosso (2005) also asserts that individuals who find pathways through stressful situations and racially charged institutions often exhibit a high sense of navigational capital. The research foregrounds that Black students frequently face challenges not only in financing their education but also in managing loan repayments post-college (Fox et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). Similarly, this holds for students who have experienced foster care (Gross et al., 2022; Lane, 2022; Schelbe et al., 2023). Hence, selecting an institution closely linked to a student's financial capacity and possible stability outcomes was a norm for Shawntae and others.

In a similar fashion, Roxanne's funding options influenced her decision to attend a four-year university in the Midwest. Roxanne, a first-year student pursuing an undergraduate degree in psychology, who was placed in foster care at the age of three and thirteen. She asserts that the monetary contributions offered by the schools were essential in her institutional decision-making process, and she noted:

Every other college didn't have the [foster care-focused campus support program]. The program is really kind of what caught my eye, because it was a lot of free money, free money, free money. "I can help you. You don't have to struggle no more." So that was kind of what I was really interested in was the free money, free money, free money thing. I think only maybe one other college that I was looking into had a [foster care-focused campus support program]. Other than that, none of them did. And I would've had really little to no support in those colleges, and I didn't want that.

The aforementioned quote from Roxanne emphasizes the value of the program for students who have experienced foster care as well as the financial benefits of participating in the campus support program. For Roxanne, the "free money" was vital for her college pursuits as she aged out of foster care at the age of 18 and did not have any other financial support. For Roxanne, her institutional choice was based on three forms of capital: navigational, social, and aspirational (Yosso, 2005). These three forms of capital may have offered her a greater sense of stability than she had experienced before, moving from placement to placement. Her complex navigation of two racially unjust systems, the foster care system and the college-going higher education process to secure scholarships and support, both reflect her determination to survive. Her institutional choice was not only based on the financial support offered by her institution, but it was also accompanied by a campus support program for college students with foster care histories that provided not only financial but also emotional, and social support. Furthermore, her aspirations to attend college were matched with the financial support to fulfill her dreams. As displayed by Eve, Shawntae, and Roxanne's reflections above, their institutional choices were based upon their various forms of capital at the convergence of the financial packages the PWIs were able to offer them.

"I Knew That It was Going to Be Hard to Get There and Pay for It": Limited Funding Affects the Decision to Attend HBCUs

When conducting research about institutional funding and making decisions about which institutions to attend, a significant number of participants expressed a desire to attend an HBCU.

Although only four participants (i.e., Alvin, Brandy, Earl, Trina) ended up at HBCUs, seven other participants expressed their interest in enrolling in such institutions, seeking to be surrounded by individuals who shared their racial identity and desiring to deepen their understanding of themselves as Black individuals. In the end, several participants (i.e., Kimberly, Erykah, Halle, Marlanna) opted not to attend an HBCU due to financial necessity to receive the most favorable financial aid package. For Instance, Kimberly, a first-year majoring in communications and media, but who recently decided to switch to social work shared about the financial constraints that were associated with her institutional choice not to attend an HBCU:

I wanted to go to a HBCU. I had applied to Howard, Clark Atlantic, schools in Florida, like FAMU. All types of HBCUs. But for me, the biggest thing was financials because my scholarship here in Indiana couldn't transfer to other schools. But an HBCU is somewhere where I'd want to go because I can share my experiences with other people of color. For me, going through the foster care system, I always ended up with people that were White. I just wanted to be with people that I could relate to and just see people that look like me. That's something else I have been considering after two years here, transferring to an HBCU, just to actually get that experience, because that's something I still want to get a grasp of because, with [Let It Go University:4-year Public PWI in the Midwest], you have to join a lot of clubs or programs, or become a part of a sorority or fraternity to be around people that look like you. You don't just see a group of Black people just on campus. There's a lot of White people. And HBCU was really just where I wanted to get that experience of living Black, not having White influence constantly.

Based on the quotation above, Kimberly expressed her desire to venture beyond the limitations imposed by her upbringing in the foster care system, which was predominantly shaped by white influences. Despite ultimately attending a PWI, she aspired to attend an HBCU, where she could be around other Black students and develop a deeper understanding of her identity as a Black individual. If given the opportunity to attend an HBCU, Kimberly would have gotten the Black communal experience she often longed for during her time in foster care. Black youth who have experienced the foster care system often encounter situations where their racial and/or ethnic identities are not adequately acknowledged or connected to those responsible for their care. As

reunification with their families is a rare occurrence for Black youth in the system, coupled with the challenges Black families face in adoption, Black children frequently spend years within the foster care system, often surrounded by individuals who do not share their racial identity (Roberts, 2022). Kimberly entered foster care at the age of eleven, along with her twin brother. Some years later, she was adopted (i.e., at 16 years old) by a gay white couple from outside of America. Kimberly explained in the interviews that her dads assisted and supported her in exploring her Black identity and educating her on their international upbringing. More often than not identity exploration is not typically offered to Black children placed in the foster care system. If identity exploration does not occur, then the Black youth are left in isolation or singularity to comprehend their Black identities in relationship to or in opposition with their family members who may not hold the same racial identity. The youth then feel a tension of being Black in predominantly white spaces. As the child welfare (e.g., foster care) system was originally designed to aid white families and prioritize white children (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972), this inherent whiteness persists within child welfare (Roberts, 2022; Whitman, 2021), offering limited opportunities for many Black children to explore their cultural heritage and racial identities. Attending an HBCU could have facilitated greater comprehension and connection to her racial and ethnic identities. Kimberly was faced with multiple barriers during her college pursuit, including financial barriers due to HBCUs frequently receiving inadequate funding from the state or limited funds from endowments and alumni (Saunders et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2024; Toldson, 2016; Williams & Davis, 2019). Another barrier was limited flexibility with scholarship funding since her state scholarship could not be transferred to another institution.

Other participants had to make similar decisions due to limited finances. For instance, Erykah, who spent 12 years (i.e., 6 -18 years old) in the foster care system was 32 at the time of

our interview and had completed her bachelor's and doctoral degree in STEM majors, shares her recollection of her undergraduate institutional decision to attend a PWI over a HBCU:

When I got to the school [new high school], I gravitated to the Black people because I felt like I would be more comfortable with them. But because they had grew up around diversity, they were not my type of Black. I realized that very quickly, just having my background. I didn't mesh with them as much as I thought I would, and they pretty much did the same thing and talked the same way and had the same experiences as the white people, so they actually could relate to them more than they could relate to me. I just was, not fed up, but I was itching for a change when it came to college. I thought an HBCU would be a different change of pace from all of that. I remember mentioning it to some of the people in the high school and they were discouraging me not to do it because they didn't think, "Oh, the world is not like this, so why would you go to an HBCU?" Or they thought they would be robbed of an experience or something if they went to an HBCU like it wouldn't be realistic to stay. But I was still itching for it. So, I applied to Spelman and I applied to, I think it was Clark Atlanta, but ended up not going because they didn't give as much scholarship money. But just going through that process was interesting.

Erykah's quotation highlights how she saw an HBCU offering her a breath of fresh air, away from the white norm prominence she had been surrounded by for so long. Furthermore, it is imperative to highlight how an HBCU would have provided her with the chance to interact with Black individuals beyond her personal connections. Beyond that, despite the HBCU criticism failing to discourage her, Erykah's plans to apply remained steadfast, yet the absence of suitable financial support ultimately impeded her ability to enroll and attend an HBCU. Here, it is important to emphasize that Erykah's decision to attend a PWI was connected to her thought process of wanting to have some stability in her college experience. The scholarships she was offered and her time working as a residential assistant (RA) allowed her to graduate from college debt-free. That is, not having to put herself in a struggling financial situation that would have most likely impeded her ability to solely focus on school and work towards graduation without any additional obstacles. Similar outcomes were concluded in Clayton et al's 2023 scholarship. In this case, forcing students to choose between their identities and their educational costs. The

choice not to enroll in an HBCU for some students was primarily driven by different financial constraints and other aspects of college life, and campus culture.

Some HBCU campuses are often publicized to be fashion-forward and provide opportunities for various levels of self-expression (Cineus, 2023) (however this is not the case for all study groups- see Mobley, 2019). Although this kind of artistic and self-expression is admirable, people from various caste systems (i.e., low-income households) (Wilkerson, 2020), those who have experienced foster care (Johnson, 2020), and Black women (Lee Johnson, 2022) may find it difficult to adapt to such an environment. For some participants in this study, being a part of pre-college programs for foster care youth provided them with opportunities to go on college tours, which assisted them in making their institutional choices. Halle demonstrated a form of resistance capital through her cultural understanding of the various caste systems at play (Yosso, 2005). Her awareness of how class and gender dynamics might manifest on HBCU campuses and support structures on inequality discouraged her from pursuing enrollment at such institutions. Not only that, but she also exercised linguistic capital, as evidenced by her memories of Black women's culture at HBCUs and the focus placed on women to conform to a certain frame of aesthetics and beauty that is held to a high standard at HBCUs and elsewhere in society. Halle, stated the following about finances in relation to her institutional choice:

I did college tours and stuff. I went to [In Your Hands University: 4-year Public Southeast HBCU]. I just knew that that wasn't going to be the right school for me because of just me... You know, as girls, we want to always look good. I'm like, "Everybody looks good. I just can't." I'm like, "I can't. I always have to look good." It's like the standard. I don't know how to explain it. I was just like, "I don't know if I could do that." I'm like, "My money. How I'm going to be spending my money," which is not going to be right.

In her quotation above, Halle, who was in foster care from the age of twelve to seventeen describes an important influential factor for her in her institutional choice process. Going to In

Your Hands University, an HBCU would have been financially taxing for Halle since she felt she would have had to keep up with the culture of the institution. For her, she based her institutional choice on her yearning for financial stability, not only the shortage of funding that was available, but also the cost of being a Black woman at an HBCU. Her understanding of what it meant to be a Black woman on campus at an HBCU was that she had to "always look good" and she did not want to be different from "everybody". She was cognizant of the "standard" lifestyle and remained mindful of what her priorities were going to be as a college student. Further, for Black women with experiences in foster care, their connections to their hair may be more nuanced and complex (Dove & Powers, 2018). As highlighted in Lee-Johnson (2022), being a Black woman at an HBCU often entails navigating conflicts, particularly concerning conforming to hegemonic ideologies of self-presentation, such as the expectation to maintain a daily appearance of well-dressed attire, makeup done, and styled hair. Frequently, in such scenarios, women persistently encounter specific expectations and various forms of discrimination, including sexism, racism, and other oppressive societal norms (Lee-Johnson, 2022). Not only did she rationalize her identity as a woman at an HBCU but also as a first-generation low-income student. For example, Halle's situation also highlights her awareness of how she fits into the broader framing of students and social class. See Chapman et al., (2020); Freeman (2005); and McDonough et al., (1997) for associated considerations of a Black student's social class and institutional choice. Instances like these have been recorded in the accounts of Black students enrolled in HBCUs, detailing their experiences wrestling with intra-racial social class dynamics within the campuses they inhabit (Mobley, 2015). Based on Halle's explanation, there is a vital underpinning of what defines looking good at the intersection of money, attendance at an HBCU, and how a former foster youth may combine all these components in their choice of a higher education institution.

As some participants in this study mentioned and highlighted by research (Chang et al., 2018; Stone, 2024), and as my time working with foster care youth has shown, more often than not, foster care youth do not have access to high-end or a surplus (e.g., shoes, outfits, accessories) of items comparable to their other non-foster peers. Halle's experiences in foster care and identity as a Black woman influenced her perceptions of money and financial securities and/or insecurities, therefore, influencing her institutional choice.

Similar sentiments on funding options were echoed by other participants regarding their decision-making process for selecting institutions based on the intersections of their race and social class. For instance, Marlanna (identities as nonbinary), whose eldest brother provided kinship care for them and their siblings, recalls the financial preferences that influenced their institutional choice:

I think just being a Black student, I knew that I wanted to go to HBCU. But I also knew as far as being a student that has a background in foster care and also low income as well, I knew that it was going to be hard to get there and pay for it and stuff like that. So that's what I was worried about as far as just getting there. And then I think when it got really close to that time, to this is when you're supposed to be applying to colleges and this is when you're supposed to have your scholarships ready, I just felt like because of everything that was going on outside of school, it would just be too much for me to push myself into that.

Marlanna's quote above encapsulates their thought process in navigating their various identities to inform their decision-making regarding institutional choice. In essence, Marlanna's identity as a Black individual motivated them to consider attending an HBCU, yet their position within the societal caste system caused them to be reluctant about this decision. During our interview, they mentioned how their older sister's attendance at an HBCU influenced their consideration of such institutions. However, they also weighed the importance of finding a financially suitable option for their specific circumstances. Ultimately, they chose to enroll at a PWI that offered a more relevant funding package, providing them with more financial stability than they anticipated

receiving at an HBCU. By opting for a less stressful option, they avoided overwhelming themselves with navigating the complexities of the HBCU enrollment process.

Participants in this segment wanted to attend HBCUs to explore their Black racial and ethnic identities further and be around individuals who looked like them. Most participants in the study noted that their time in the foster care system was frequently filled with racially charged interactions between white people and those who liked them. Because the foster care system was not designed for Black children (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972), it remains a harmful space for Black children and families (Roberts, 2022). Participants saw an HBCU as a way to escape the predominantly white spaces they were used to growing up in the foster care system.

Unfortunately, most participants were unable to attend HBCUs due to insufficient available governmental funding and or the skyrocketing costs (Strayhorn et al., 2024) of higher education all together. Some participants desired to attend HBCUs in order to better understand and explore their racial identities, however this option was not feasible due to insufficient funding. Furthermore, students sought to establish and preserve a sense of stability, which for most of them was something they were not able to experience growing up. Without the financial support to attend an HBCU, some participants were left with no choice, but to enroll in a PWI and attempt to try and discover Black communities and safe spaces within their campus environments.

“She Said, “Apply.” I Applied”: Relationships and Proximity to Institutions Shape Institutional Choices

Many of the participants were placed in foster care due to unstable living conditions and the lack of significant and uplifting relationships. Participants' relationships varied, providing diverse contexts that influenced their college decisions. For instance, some participants' decisions were influenced by proximity to family, friends, romantic partners, and endorsements from

professional staff (e.g., teachers, lawyers, advocates, faculty members). Chapman and colleagues (2020) feature the important role families and support systems play in a Black student's institution choice. Considering this, participants' social capital assisted them in making their decision about what school to attend. Social capital could be related to the participants' associations with their established support systems, as well as the desire to have some feeling of security that was not often provided to them as youth. The following themes emerged: 1) "It Was Close Enough to Home": The Impact of Family and Available Transportation in Institutional Enrollment Choices, 2) "So It Really Was Because of a Boy": When Romance Leads-The Effect of Partnered Relationships on Institutional Choice, 3) "My Best Friend was Going Too": The Role of Peers in Shaping Institutional Choice, and 4) "She was Like, 'Your Not Going There', 'You're Selling Yourself Short'": How Communal and Professional Supports Influence Institutional Choice.

"It Was Close Enough to Home": The Impact of Family and Available Transportation in Institutional Enrollment Choices

Familial relationships impacted Shawntae, Kimberly, Marlanna, Janet, and Earl's institutional choices in multiple ways; some were influenced by a parental figure who had prior knowledge of the institution, where others weighed the impact of how geographically close or far the institution was to their families. Issues of transportation and the expense of commuting home during school breaks also influenced their choices. For instance, Shawntae, a student from the Western part of the country was paying for her schooling through scholarships and participated in the foster care support program on her institution's campus. She explains in high school that her dream to attend a HBCU:

I want to go to an HBCU. I want to live in the south somewhere. That was my high school goal. I think I realized junior year that I was like, Okay, no. I don't want to leave my family. I want to stay close. So, I ended up going to [What'Chu Like University].

Unfortunately for Shawntae, there are no undergraduate HBCU programs on the West Coast, and being the oldest of seven, she did not want to be separated from her family, particularly her younger siblings. Based on her quotation, both familial and navigational capital influenced her choice of institution. During the interview, Shawntae stressed how she felt a personal responsibility to care for her siblings and how the frequent neglect of their parents before their placement in kinship care forced her to assume a maternal role. This maternal pattern also influenced her college decision. Despite her ambitions to move away to attend an HBCU, she decided to attend an institution that was close to her family, allowing her to see them regularly and help with her younger siblings (see similar findings in Jabbar et al., 2019; Lopez et al., 2024). As the oldest sibling, her decision to stay close to home provided her siblings a way to understand the college-going process of first-generation students further.

As another example of someone who selected an institution because of its location to family, Kimberly also desired to attend an HBCU. Like Shawntae, who received scholarships and found community from her campus's foster care support program, mentioned she might go to an HBCU for graduate school. In the meantime, Kimberly wanted to stay close to her adoptive dad's for her undergraduate experience. She mentioned: "[Let It Go University] is not too far from where my parents reside here in [Midwest state]". Kimberley valued staying close to home because she wanted to be able to return home for long weekends and/or vacations. Such visits were significant because, previous to adoption, she was unable to take part in family occasions such as holiday gatherings and celebrations. Likewise, Marlanna, a second-year student, working towards their bachelor's in medical studies wanted to remain close to family and offered:

I think it was just being close to my siblings. I know that I really like to be able to see them a lot and stuff, so just being able to be nearby to them. And then also because I didn't have my license yet and I'm still working on that and stuff like that. It was just kind

of like, I don't have a car, I don't have a license. Just a lot of things that I felt like I needed to still get ready before I move out of the state. So yeah, that was just more my thing as far as, even though I'm on the downtown [institution] campus and that's an hour, two hours away from where my family is. I get the space to grow, be my own person, stuff like that. But also, if there is an emergency, I don't feel like I'm stranded all by myself.

Similar to their peers, Shawntae and Kimberly, Marlanna was able to attend school due to scholarships they received and also found support on campus through a program geared towards assisting students with foster care backgrounds. Marlanna, who was placed in the care of their oldest brother at 15 years old identified that an institution that was close to their family and had the fewest transportation obstacles and impediments was the best option for them. Since they also wanted to attend an HBCU like their older sister, who is currently a student at an institution on the East Coast, they felt it might not be possible. Staying close to their other siblings and preparing themselves to eventually move away were significant factors in their college decision-making process. Marlanna recognized that choosing a school farther away would separate them from their family and would result in additional hardship when attempting to visit them without a driver's license, even while they desired some time apart from them for personal growth and development.

Similar transportation constraints influenced the college selection process of other participants (e.g., Janet, Rashia, Trina, Robin) as well. Obtaining a driver's license can be a challenge for countless individuals with foster care histories, which may prompt them to reassess their college possibilities and higher education attendance. For example, having the funds to commute and/or attend institutions in remote locations with limited public transportation alternatives may be a significant hurdle for Black students with foster care experiences. The close family ties were also evident in the artifact Marlanna chose—a film camera. A camera that

was often used to take pictures of siblings and important moments. She spoke about how the camera allowed her to recall significant moments in the past.

I feel like in a lot of ways I felt like I had to grow up really fast. So being able to take pictures of things [pictures of my siblings, moving into the dorm and stuff like that] can just help me slow down and really see what's going on in a way. Because you got to take out the camera and then focus it and stuff like that, versus just a digital camera, you just taking a picture. But more with a film camera, I feel like there's more that's involved in taking the picture. And then also it's like because you only have so many...because film is super expensive now and then it's like you only have so many pictures, it's like you really want to take the time to capture the perfect moment.

It is possible that this artifact helped Marlanna remain connected to her family through photography. Their choice of institution and artifact was influenced by familial capital. Marlanna saw the family as instrumental in their process of growing up, hence their decision to stay close to them when selecting their institution to attend. In addition to being mindful of capturing the right shot, or taking the “time to capture the perfect moment”, and weighing the financial cost of the film, Marlanna was able to alchemize the trauma of growing up too fast into art.

Like Marlanna who was motivated in her college selection by geographical relation to her family, proximity to family also influenced Janet’s decisions. Janet discussed one of the elements that impacted her decision to attend her first institution, a community college.

My mom got her associate's degree from there, and I'm a huge fan of family tradition. My adopted family came from a line of farm hands and uneducated people, and my mom was the first person to get higher education. She got a community college degree, she became a registered nurse. She went to [State of the World College]. It also was close enough to home that I could stay home, and I don't drive, but there was still reliable transportation that I had between [the two cities].

As a current graduate student, she received scholarships (e.g., academic, G.I. Bill) to cover all three of her degrees (associate, bachelor, master) at different institutions, highlights that staying close to home was important for her. As she describes not only staying close to home, having

access to transportation and housing, but also honoring her family by attending the same school as her adoptive mother. She also shared:

I haven't mentioned that my sister had a baby while I was going through military training. She was 19 when she had her baby, unwed. There's a long, long, long string of teen pregnancies, unmarried pregnancies, in my biological family. But she had a baby while I was going through military training, and she lost custody of her kid. My mother was also her foster mother for a year of baby's life. My mother works full-time, and so I was in part in charge of childcare of my sister's baby while I was going through college.

The commitment to make sure this new child was taken care of by family members was one more responsibility that Janet had to balance while attending college. She was able to balance course work, military training, and auntie responsibilities. Being a college student does not eradicate the responsibilities that some foster youth have to their siblings or families (i.e., biological or adoptive). In the same manner of family proximity, Earl indicated:

My mom literally worked 15 minutes up the street from there. So it was one of those where Fridays, if she worked, she would come and pick me up and then we would go home after she gets off work. Or I had one of my brothers and sister-in-law, they worked right down the street. I was accessible and that's how she [adoptive mom] sold it to me when we had that conversation.

In his quotation above, Earl conveys that the HBCU he attended was close to his family and was encouraged by his adoptive mom. In addition, being close to home allowed him to be “accessible” to his family and his family to him. For Shawntae, Marlanna, Kimberly, Janet, and Earl’s college decisions were shaped by their familial capital. Being geographically close to family may have offered participants some normalcy, or a sense of stability. Individuals who once may have felt abandoned and/or trying to understand themselves and make sense of their identities saw staying close to home as a way to remain connected and supported by their family.

“So It Really Was Because of a Boy”: When Romance Leads-The Effect of Partnered Relationships on Institutional Choice

The geographical location of the institution and its distance to significant support networks are frequently essential indicators of students' submission of college applications and confirmed enrollment (Lopez et al, 2024; Perna, 2006). A number of women participants acknowledged that remaining geographically close to individuals they had emotional ties to impacted their institutional choice. As partners can be systems of support, Chapman and associates' (2020) model affirms such findings. More specifically, romantic partners played a significant role in participants' college-going decisions. Sandra, Roxanne, Lauryn, Yolanda, and Halle all selected to enroll in institutions of higher education that were close to their male partners at the time. For example, Sandra, a second-year student at a four-year institution, working towards her bachelor's in legal studies and who spent time in 15 different types of placements during her time in the foster care system shared about how her institutional choice was influenced by her partner's location:

I got accepted to 20 different schools, but I went to [Let It Go University] because I was with my ex-fiancé and he couldn't do long distance....I was just like, "Okay, we're just going to do this. It's okay." And I talked to my fiancé about it. I was just like, "They don't have my degree, my curriculum that I want, and I'm going to go here because he's right down the street and we don't have to move from our place. We can just get into a bigger one. He was going to go back to [Let It Go University], which he never did.

Sandra, who had experienced foster care across two states, acknowledged that her institutional choice was based on the institution's location to her partner at the time. In Sandra's case, she elected to forgo some of her higher education goals in order to be close to her ex-fiancé. Sandra made several sacrifices (e.g., did not have her academic major) to stay close to her partner. At the same time, her institutional choice also allowed her to stay at her current residence and not have to move, which often comes with additional challenges as a person with a foster care background (see Chapter 5).

Just as Sandra decided to attend her institution at the opportunity of being closer to her male significant other, so did other participants such as Roxanne who was placed in foster care in multiple states. She offers how her institutional choice was influenced by her ex-boyfriend:

So originally, I chose [Go On Girl University] because they had a program. They had the Foster Success program, which is basically what my college is paid for free. And then I was going to go somewhere else. And then I really chose [Go On Girl University] because there was a boy down here, my ex-boyfriend, and then I broke up with him, and then I was going to leave [Go On Girl University] actually and go live in California with my siblings (i.e. foster siblings), and then I met another boy.

From her quotation above, two distinct factors stand out in Roxanne's decision to attend her particular institution. One is that the school had a support program for students like herself for individuals with foster care histories. Campus support programs for students with foster care experiences were mentioned in other participants' (i.e., 15) interviews, but not all of them chose their institutions because of these programs. For Roxanne, her ex-boyfriend influenced her institutional choice, and another forming relationship influenced her to stay at Go On Girl University. Relational relationships were important to Roxanne and had a substantial impact on her institutional choice. Moreover, there were frequently added perks to attending the same university as her significant other, such as not having to navigate her way through college alone. Although they are no longer in a romantic relationship, at the time it is possible that she saw him as a key member of her support network, a stable and unwavering being in her complex life. Identical Sandra and Roxanne, Lauryn who also experienced foster care in more than one state, also chose an institution based on a male counterpart. While a "boy" was a factor for her, other considerations assisted in her institution choice as well. She shares:

By the time I was finishing out that part of my sophomore year, I just felt that it would make more sense to just go to school at [Fu-Gee-La State], because I was in [Southeast metropolitan city], and I could figure out my living situation and everything, no problem. It was really because of a boy, but also I wanted to be closer to what I'm used to getting to work and making money, my own money, and eventually having my own home. That

is what eventually happened, but the reason was because I thought I knew what I was doing, and in turn after some time, was because of my relationship, so at the time.

Unlike her peers (e.g., Sandra, and Roxanne), Lauryn attended a different institution and transferred to another school to support her relationship. As identified in her quotation, selecting to attend another institution had several benefits for her; however, “at the time” attending an institution closer to her male partner was ideal for her. As numerous participants have stated in previous themes, safe and affordable housing is critical, particularly for individuals who have experienced housing insecurity. Moreover, living in a city with easy mobility and job opportunities substantially impacted their institutional choice. Apart from that, Lauryn needed to be able to work and save money before purchasing her own home. The city's affordability is also an essential consideration for college students who do not live on campus. Combined, the ability to frequently see her partner, access to jobs, and opportunities to save and eventually buy a home contribute to the study's concept of stability for Black college students with foster care backgrounds.

The same was true for Yolanda who chose to attend an institution closer to her partner, and who had a foster care status across two states. She stated:

I didn't want to really go to [Through the Storm College] really because I wasn't going to be living in [city in California] like that no more. I wanted to go to a school that was closer, which led me to [My Desire College: Two-year Public] because that was literally 20 minutes, probably 25 minutes away from my baby's daddy house. So, I ended up going there and actually enrolling.

Earlier, Yolanda shared how her children influenced her college-going decisions. As asserted in the passage above, her children also had some impact on her institutional choice. That is, being closer to the father of one of her children was important. In this example, the intersections of a few relationships were prominent. For example, Yolanda being close to her child's father and her child being close to their father were meaningful to consider in her selection of an institution.

Enrolling at an institution close to her child and the child's father could have some additional benefits, including, but not limited to, financial support, child care, and other items that could be costly if Yolanda had selected an institution further away. Yolanda grew up not knowing much about her own family until many years later. In order to avoid a similar outcome for her children, she chose to join My Desire College. Mutually, when deciding between institutions, Halle chose a school closer to her male companion at the time, primarily to amend the travel time required to visit each other because they resided in separate cities. In a conversation with her dad, about institutional choices, she details:

Then he [dad] was like, "Oh. To be more considerate to the guy [I was talking to] at the time." He was like, "That's closer to him." He was like, "So he wouldn't have to always be traveling back and forth, because he was always traveling back and forth."

On par with Sandra, Roxanne, Lauryn, and Yolanda, Halle also experienced foster care across multiple states and chose to be a student at an institution in close proximity to their romantic partner at the time. Halle's dad helped her think about different ways to approach her institutional choices concerning being in a long-distance relationship and ways to mitigate the distance between his daughter and the young man she was talking to at the time. Ultimately, she decided to enroll in an institution that allowed them to see each other more often by decreasing the driving time compared to another institution she was considering at the time.

Again, collectively, all of these women had foster experiences that spanned across more than one state. Having experienced constant moves and various types of placements across county and state lines, their intimate connections might have held significant value. This value could include a desire for control over their own lives, and a yearning for continuous relationships while attempting to cope with past abandonment experiences. Their choice of institution, to remain parallel with their partners, served as a bridge to design a sense of stability

at the intersection of their identities (i.e., college students, women, partnered, and with a history of foster care experiences). Even though they all acknowledged that they were no longer seeing those individuals, their institutional decisions were influenced by their relationships with those specific men. For them, social and navigational capital played major roles in their college choice processes. The women participants had been in foster care in two different states growing up, and favored institutions that would not disrupt their relationships. In moments of significant transition, sometimes a consistent factor of a previous relationship helps anchor one's identity when facing challenges. More often than not, women typically consider multiple factors when contemplating career goals, including whether they want to be partnered and how those decisions could impact that relationship. For Black women with foster care experiences and histories of moving, being close to a romantic partner may offer a sense of stability they did not often experience. In comparison to their other women peers (e.g., those not with foster care experiences), a small select group of women participants in this study made sacrifices for their male partners. This sacrifice of institutional decisions could be a part of the patriarchal system that overrides society and/or their desire to deeply value the intimate relationship they were in during the institutional choice process.

“My Best Friend was Going Too”: The Role of Peers in Shaping Institutional Choice

A few participants highlighted that their choices of higher education institutions were influenced by friends and peers. Similar outcomes were concluded in other scholars' findings on institutional choice. (Chapman et al., 2020). Melissa, Alvin, Zakia, Rashia, and Darius all mentioned that their institutional choices were made at the attendance or recommendations of their friends. For example, friends' institutional choices sometimes gave participants the push to

attend the same college or university. Melissa, a fourth-year student, getting ready to graduate with her bachelor's in social work from her institution offered:

I think my friend also came to [Let It Go University], so that was another reason. I think that was the deciding factor of why I came here because my friend, she was like, "Yeah, I applied there too, and I got accepted," and I was telling her, "You should apply to [4 My People State]," but she didn't want to do that. So, I was just like, "Okay, we can do [Let It Go University] as well." I guess that was another factor. I didn't want to go off and be alone. That's kind of nerve-racking for me at least. I know people do it, but for me, I would have liked my friend to be with me.

Melissa continued when explaining her choice to pursue graduate school:

I've already done four [years of undergrad]. That's why I'm like, "I don't know if I could do two more [years of graduate school]. I'm ready to be done." Honestly, I'm fighting myself to even go right after. I was really thinking about taking a little break and then just doing the two years. I was really thinking about it, but I feel like I just got to keep going basically. We're going to see, and then a lot of my friends are also doing the same program, so I know if we're doing it together it's going to be easy, easier.

In the first quotation above, Melissa underscores that having a friend at the same institution heavily influenced her decision. As taken from her quotation above, her friends influenced her college-going process in multiple ways: the decision to go to school (i.e., undergraduate, graduate), institutional choice, and academic major. Chapman (1981) affirms that college-going students often consider friends' decisions and or advice when selecting an institution. Having a close support person to navigate the collegiate terrain was important, as it would help eliminate the possibility of exploring higher education alone. Trio programs such as Posse have called attention to the overall development, transition, and success outcomes that typically arise when students tackle higher education together. The same was true for participants who chose institutions close to family and romantic partners. Moreover, Alvin, a former student-athlete and a current police officer, discussed how his friend influenced his decision to attend a "junior college" (i.e., community college) and an HBCU:

I really didn't know where to go and one of my friends... one of my homeboys that played football with me ended up going to a junior college up in [Midwest state] So, I was like,

"I'll just... I'll try that out," and I ended up going there one year, tore my ACL. Then after that, we ended up going to a HBCU at [Southeast state].....We end up... I think my homeboy, his dad ended up hearing about the school. I think somebody he knew went there.

According to Alvin's quote above, as with Melissa's, friends had a key role in deciding which institutions to attend, not once, but twice. While he was eligible to play football at both institutions, his friends' insights about different schools and their choices to attend them influenced his own decision to commit to an institution, as well. Although his first few institutions were based on the influences of his friends, he graduated with a bachelor's in criminal justice at his third institution, a PWI in the Midwest, that did not have connections to any of his friends. This theme shows how Alvin and Melissa's specific college-going friends served as sources of social capital in choosing which institutions to attend.

Not only was Alvin's institution choice impacted by his friends but the same was true for some other participants as well. For instance, Zakia, who spent time in four different out-of-home placement types and wants to become a teacher and eventually a college professor shared:

I never had a tour of [The Peace of Mind University] so it's funny because looking back, "What did I go off of?" I think for me, it was like a... We had a virtual meeting. The school had a virtual meeting with and one of the advisors was speaking very well about the school itself. Some of her words, I just was drawn to it and it also was a private school. I'm like, "I'll stand out more in a smaller place. I'll be able to join clubs and certain organizations." So that was a factor. And then also, my best friend was going to [The Peace of Mind University] too. I'm like, "Okay. Boom. That just says it. We're going.

Zakia had many reasons she wanted to attend [The Peace of Mind University]. However, having her best friend attend the same institution was a significantly important factor in her college choice. Going off to college at times is sometimes seen as frightening and full of challenges, however, having a friend that could help with the transition to college can often be helpful. As Zakia, was a first-generation student who knew nothing about college, and did not get to tour

institutions due to COVID-19, having a friend at her institution was a considerable benefit. She expresses:

I've never touched foot on a college campus before. I never had a tour. And it was a little bit harder because it was COVID. It was an area of adjustment and I didn't really know too much about what college life looked like because nobody's in my family been to college and I never had anything to look back on.

Without a parent role modeling and advice, the college going process, more specially selecting an institution could be hard, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, deciding to attend an institution you have never seen in person more often than not adds another level of barriers. However, for Zakia she had a friend to help with the transition process. Even though Zakia switched to a different institution following the completion of her first year, as her remark above acknowledges, her friend's institutional choice also influenced her college choice.

Rashia, who identifies as multiracial (e.g. Black, Dominican, Native, and Italian), is a first-year student pursuing her associate degree in digital photography and planning to get her bachelor's in graphic design, shared a similar decision on college choice as Melissa, Alivn, and Zakia; she specified, "Because they were local and I heard good things, how they treated their students. Also, I had friends that went there". Related to other participants, there were several reasons why a specific institution was chosen, nevertheless, one defining feature was the association between the institution and friends. Rashia, who was attending her fifth institution, was guided not just by her friends' college choices, but also by the artifacts she chose to share. She stated the following regarding the relevance and value of her camera(s):

Because a lot of the pictures I take is... I show people of color, because they're not really represented in a good way in the US, at all. Or anywhere in that matter. And it's really important to me, personally, for not... Most of my friends are... they're Black, Hispanic, or something in that nature. I always do photo shoots that represent... They're not all bad..... I liked taking pictures of my friends, nature, and animals [in reference to using a Polaroid camera during foster care].....Because memories is a very important thing to

me. Taking photos of my mom, my sister, my dad, my animals and my best friends. That's top tier. I love doing it [in reference to her current situation using a digital camera].

In her quotation above, Rashia shares about her cameras and what they provided for her currently as well as growing up. Yosso's (2005) social, familial, and resistance capital are all present in Rashia's artifact. The camera allowed Rashia to capture her friends of color in ways that showed a humanizing aspect of people who looked like her, something she felt was not often granted to individuals of color, acting as a tool of resistance. To her, friends were always an important factor in her life, so her college choice was based on the references of her friends and their experiences at their particular institution. She activated her familial capital by documenting her family's moments. The camera offered her an opportunity to catch "memories," as she shared in our interview the past Christmas holiday was the first time her family had been together in years, and the camera played a major role in capturing the occasion. Her passion for photography began when she received her first camera while in foster care; now, equipped with a digital camera, she is pursuing degrees and a career as a graphic designer and photographer. The camera may have acted as a portal for her to stay connected and hold on to relationships as she navigated the challenges of foster care.

Friends played a crucial role in participants' college choices, even if considerable time had passed between their interactions. For instance, Darius, who is currently at his third higher education institution (i.e. first—in person community college, second—four-year PWI online program, and third—four-year PWI online program), explains how he ended up enrolling:

With [Wagon Wheel State], where my head was at the time, I wanted to go back to college to finish what I started, for myself. I knew I didn't want to go back to [Star Gazing Community College (SGCC)] because I was like, I want the four-year college experience. But I didn't have the grades, at least from what was on my transcript, because I think they [Southern Comfort University SCU] wanted something to the effect of 3.5 or something high like that. They're so competitive over there [SCU], I was basically advised that it would be best to transfer in, versus just applying and hoping to get

admitted. I was like, okay. Then I started seeing some advertisements about [Wagon Wheel State], and an old friend in my life was going to [Wagon Wheel State], he was like, "Yeah, there's a [Wagon Wheel State-Global Campus], and you should check them out if you're thinking about going back to school and all that." I was like, "Oh, okay." I did my homework and research and I was like, "Wow, [Wagon Wheel State] isn't out here looking for a 1200 SAT score and 3.5 GPA, they just want you to come and learn, and you can do that anywhere, you don't have to move to [the campus] to learn here." And all of those appealed to me, I had never heard of an online only platform up until that time.

Darius navigated his journey to college through various stages, phases, layers, as described in different college choice models (Freeman, 2005; Chapman et al., 2020; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). He deliberated on whether pursuing or returning to higher education was the right choice for him. Maneuvering through the various college-choice levels involved exploring and comparing different institutions and engaging in self-reflection by reviewing his transcripts and considering his standardized test scores, which often pose challenges and barriers for Black and brown students seeking to further their education (Ford & Helms, 2012). What transcripts and standardized test fail to take into consideration are the adverse experiences of students who have foster care backgrounds. Among all these nuanced decisions he resisted the urge to give up in his pursuit of a higher education opportunity. To add, Darius notes how he became aware of his current institution and how his old acquaintances' recommendations led him to become a college student. In this case, Darius utilized a range of capitals to select a particular institution.

Navigational capital served to steer him through the higher education process, from searching for an institution to enrolling. He leveraged aspiration capital because he wanted to complete what he had started, even if it was at a different institution. Resistant capital was deployed because he refused to let his GPA or test result deter him or cause him to abandon his goals. Finally, social capital, or interacting with and absorbing information from friends, helped him

learn about his current institution. Darius's friend's affirmation of institutional choice emulates the institutional decisions also seen in the quotations of Melissa, Alvin, Zakia, and Rashia.

For the group, it is possible that friends offered them a sense of comfort and security in their institution selections. For Melissa, Alvin, Zakia, Rashia, and Darius, their collegial choices were based upon their social capital, that is participants gain and maintained a sense of knowledge through their connections to their friends. For them having a friend at the same institution may have offered them a sense of stability, which could be a connection to a form of security and constancy. Moreover, a posse or a group of individuals a person may rely on in times of challenges and/or growth.

"She Was Like, 'You're Not Going There', 'You're Selling Yourself Short'": How Communal and Professional Supports Influence Institutional Choice

While participants' college choices were influenced by family, romantic partners, and friends, community and professional support individuals also played a significant role in their decision-making process. For example, Champman et al. (2020) indicate that support personnel, including teachers, counselors, school alumni, and others, can be pivotal in shaping institutional choices. Trina, Faith, and Earl share their experiences about such influential community advocates in their college-going process. For some participants, there was considerable institutional choice support from other individuals in their lives, for instance, God, boyfriends, advocates, and teachers. As revealed by Trina, 26, who graduated from an HBCU in the Southeast and entered foster care at the age of 15, spent time in five different placements (e.g., kinship, group homes, foster family, independent living) before emancipating at the age of 21. Related to her institutional choice, Trina shares how multiple people played a role in her decision, she stated:

I began to settle to go to [Make Way College: 2-year Public], but I had a really awesome, amazing, but very nosy, child advocate and child attorney. She was like, "You're not going there. You're selling yourself short. I'm going to get you connected with the president's wife of [Rockstarr-Chandelier State: 4-year Public HBCU] and we're going to get you down there." They literally got me down there. We talked on a Monday, on a Tuesday I was packing up, and she was picking me up on a Wednesday. She sent me with \$100 to tour [Rockstarr-Chandelier State]. Wednesday night, I made the decision that I would finally go. Thursday, Friday, I was packing up my studio-style apartment. My caseworker was dropping me off on Saturday and classes started on Monday. It happened just like that.....I tell people like this, I didn't choose [Rockstarr-Chandelier State], [Rockstarr-Chandelier State] chose me.

The above quotation from Trina underscores her strong feelings and tensions with her child advocate, a Black woman. The advocate did not allow Trina to undersell her academic abilities, as Trina had participated in dual enrollment while in high school. Her child attorney was aware of her skills and wanted Trina to see her academic abilities for herself. As a first-generation college student, there could have been some negative self-assumptions about her ability to attend a four-year institution. However, her advocate influenced Trina's institutional choice and pathway. Furthermore, scholarship underscores that knowing someone at an HBCU often influences a student's institutional decision (Freeman, 1999; Johnson, 2017). In some ways, she implies that her path was predestined and that what was meant for her came to pass through her advocate, who had a connection to the president of her institution. Trina then goes on to share about other individuals who impacted her institutional decision, she adds:

I knew that I didn't want to go. Resentfully, I went. A lot of people told me that this was the best decision, that I should take it, that it's best for me to get away, that [Rockstarr-Chandelier State] had a lot to offer and the president's wife was getting me in. So it was like you got to go to [Rockstarr-Chandelier State]. I even argued with God and people have their own religious beliefs, but he talked to me audibly after me saying three times, "I'm not going," the final yell, "You're going to [Rockstarr-Chandelier State]." I just was like, all right, bro. I can't remember who wrestled with God in the Bible, wrestled with one of the angels, that was me wrestling with God that day.....It took my fiancé to tell me at the ripe age of 19, he was like, "[Trina], you need to go." He's like, "It will hurt me for you to leave, but I need you to go." I want to say for about three years of being at

[Rockstarr-Chandelier State], I was pissed off with everybody because I never chose [Rockstarr-Chandelier State]. I didn't want to go. But once I got down there, the biggest thing, even to this day, is stability. I was like, I'm not going to go down for a semester and then transfer out. I'm here. I'm going to stay.

God, advocate/child attorney, and her boyfriend/now fiancée influenced Trina's institutional decisions. They ultimately championed for her best interests and assisted her in attending and graduating from [Rockstarr-Chandelier State]. However, Trina felt tension and hesitation about leaving and attending the institution, of which she is now an alumna. As asserted in other areas of this study, God aided some of the participant's college-going processes, and Trina was no exception even after arguing. The number three is a recurring pattern in the Bible. For instance, when Trina conversed with God three times and received an answer three times, it symbolized the value of three entities, representing the voice of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a symbol of completeness. Despite his concerns about the distance, Trina's boyfriend made a unique decision. He prioritized Trina's overall success over his own satisfaction, a choice that distinguished him from the other participants in romantic relationships during their college-going process. Trina's support system was unwavering in their belief that a break was not just beneficial, but crucial for her. They were convinced that time away would be highly helpful for her. Despite Trina's initial anger towards her support systems, her decision to go to Rockstarr-Chandelier ultimately provided her with the stability she needed. Smith et al. (2015) also found that God, dating partners, and support professionals influenced the college-going decisions and experiences of four Black college students with foster care experiences in social work bachelor's programs at an HBCU.

Matched with Trina's institutional decision experiences, Faith had a professional support person who helped finalize her institutional choices. Faith, who has aspirations of becoming a

veterinarian, talks about her English teacher who influenced her institutional choice; she contributes:

She [English Teacher] knows that I wanted to be a veterinarian, and I'm like, "You know, I don't know. I know I wanted to go to a school where, one, they support kids that have been in a foster care system, and it's not too far from [city]." She told me how she graduated as an English major [from] [Mesmerized University]. They have a great foster care program." She also told me about [foster care support program]. She said they have a 24/7 cafe open for foster care kids or whatever, so you can go cook meals, or eat meals, or whatever at your convenience. They also have break housing. Winter break, you can stay here. Spring break, you can stay here. Summer break, you can stay here. They have it all for you, the housing that you need. That really drew me to the campus. When I applied, I got my application fee waived, came out here to tour the campus twice, fell in love with it or so I thought, and I'm like, "The environment was so pretty. It was just very... the nature, the scenery. The people were nice." When I got accepted and saw all my scholarships and everything, I'm like, "I came this far, and I feel very accomplished." I was so excited to come out here, and start fresh, and meet new people, and meet new friends, and everything.

Similar to Trina, Faith had some individuals who were contributory factors to her institutional selection. For Trina, those support systems were God, her advocate, and her boyfriend, and for Faith, it was her English teacher at a credit recovery school she was attending prior to attending her institution of higher education. A white woman teacher who had graduated from [Mesmerized University], and was able to provide her with some information about her own experiences, some campus resources, and some additional criteria Faith was looking for in a institution. For example, the institution was just a short distance from the city she knew well; as noted earlier, institutional location is often noteworthy to students. Furthermore, Mesmerized University offered a campus support program for students with foster care backgrounds. As pointed out in this study and other scholarships (Amechi et al., 2024; Brown, 2017; Brown et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2024; Watt et al., 2023), such programs benefit college-going students with foster care histories, especially when they provide access to adequate housing and food options.

Without her teacher and the positive relationship, they had built, Faith may not have known about such an institution.

In the same way, strong relationship ties assisted Trina and Faith in their enrollment choices, the same was true for Earl. Earl, who has aspirations of being a Vice President of Student Affairs one day, and is a current doctoral student completing his degree online at a PWI institution, discussed how his close relationship with a high school mentor and a faculty member influenced his decision to attend two HBCU's where he received his undergraduate degree and master's degree. He shared the following about his undergraduate decision:

One of my mentors went to [Puttin' In Work University] and he was the qualified professional that worked with me through high school when I was going through the programs, getting intensively home and things like that.

Additionally, he shared how a Black woman faculty member at [Puttin' In Work University] influenced his decision to in a graduate program at Made It Out State, he offers:

Like I told you, I left school, I graduated and I worked for about two years, but she [Black faculty member] also was an adjunct professor at [Made It Out State]. And then after I graduated, she went to work at [Made It Out State] full-time. She said, "Apply." I applied and I got an acceptance letter two weeks later. So that's how I ended up at [Made It Out State]..... From 2011 until now, she's nurtured me and given me the guidance that I needed to get where I wanted to be because my aunt and my grandma who wanted me to get here did not know what it was like because I'm a first-gen college student.

Earl's quotes reveal how his social capital was leveraged through his connections with various support professionals in his life. In our conversations, Earl spoke about the ups and downs he dealt with in school (e.g., behavior, relationships with teachers, transferring school). He insisted that his mentor helped him in many ways along his educational path. Like Trina and Faith, Earl's institutional choices were influenced by the relationships of people they knew who were affiliated with the school. Equally important, the Black woman faculty member who he often referred to as his "God mom" and who she refers to him as "her son", not only assisted him in his undergraduate experience but also helped him get into his master's program. Her

encouragement and “nurturing” inspired him to recognize the infinite opportunities that were awaiting him. She also influenced him to enroll in his doctoral program. She continues to be a strong influential factor not only in his college-going process but also in his life outside of the academy.

The participants (i.e., Trina, Faith, Earl) in this section highlight how their community and social support professionals aided in their institutional decisions. Furthermore, the significance of their social capitals (e.g., knowledge from their networks and access to communal resources) uplift the importance of such communities when making decisions about selecting an institution to attend. Again, the relationships with their support networks and their trust in the support professional’s judgements/referrals may add to a value of stability.

“I Just Googled Colleges that Had the Major that I Wanted”: Availability of Academic Majors and Support Programs Influence on College Choice

While substantial financial aid packages, proximity to families, romantic partners, peers, recommendations by professional individuals, and God influenced some participants' choices, others selected institutions based on the majors and programs their institutions offered. For some participants, their choice of an institution was influenced by schools that offered specific programs and/or majors aligning with their interests and potential career paths that would foster stability. Champman and associates (2020) affirm that institutional and social contexts of higher education often help students decide what institution to attend. Specifically, Jill, Toni, Rashia, Lauryn, Kioni, and Melissa chose their institutions based on the individual programs offered that aligned with their academic pursuits. All of these women entered foster care by the age of ten, and some were placed in the system multiple times. Despite their turbulent experiences growing up, they all did well academically in high school, with GPAs over 3.0. Jill, 43, a current doctoral student in education, whose high school GPA was 3.4, was placed into foster care twice at the

age of ten and twelve and a half alongside her young sister Brandy. Jill completed her associates, bachelors, and master's degree in all online programs as she was an active military service (i.e., "stationed on a ship", "deployed to Iraq") women during the majority of her educational experiences. Soon-to-be Dr. Jill explains how she decided to join The University of Golden where she received her associate and bachelor degrees:

They [institution] were the college that took all of my military time and converted it into something, to a degree that I was comfortable with.Part of it was they did have an agreement with the Navy, so they actually had an office on the base, but it is really calling around to different schools, seeing who would take what, so that's how I came across [The University of Golden] as well.

For Jill, her college-going choices were often determined by which institutions had a connection to the Navy. Using the means accessible to her, she was able to identify and choose an institution that allowed her to be both a student and a sailor. More specifically, she used her navigation and social capital to make her education possible at a particular institution. Even more, through her navigation, she found an academic program at The University of Golden that allowed her to use some of her military time towards her chosen academic major completion. While the program for Jill was not necessarily academically major/program-related, other participants' institutional choices were more directed at specific academic programs they wanted to take up. This is evident in the case of Toni, 37, a first-year doctoral student with a bachelor's and master's who wants to obtain a JD in the coming years, and who was placed in foster care at four years old and then again at the age of seven years old. She offered the following about her institutional choice:

When I was in my last group home, the group home that I told you about that offered support, care, compassion. The process was obviously my guidance counselor saying, at the top of the year, "These are your options." I already knew, because I had been given the roadmap by the lawyer. She had told me, once you graduate high school, you have to go to college in order to be a lawyer. That was the first step. I already knew I had to go to college, which was why I chose [Breathe Again College] for Criminal Justice. I was just saying to myself, "Okay, where should I go to school that would best ..." Because I had wanted to be a criminal defense attorney at that time because I had taken several criminal

justice courses in high school. I liked it, scored very well. I said, "You know what? That's what I'll do."

In continuing to explain her institutional choice, she provides the following:

That's why I went to that school. But the process of selecting the school was a school that was literally based on criminal justice. What is the best criminal justice school available? And everyone had said you can definitely go to some of the top-notch, well-known schools, but educators who are educators and leaders, anyone who's involved in criminal justice, they pass through [Breathe Again College] in some way. So you want to go to [Breathe Again College] if you're going to major in criminal justice.

For Toni, who had a 3.8 in high school, wanted to be at an institution that had a respectable criminal justice program which will aid her in her future JD pursuits. In Toni's case, several individuals were influentially involved in her decision-making process. While not many participants spoke about positive experiences with group home staff, Toni asserts that the staff at this residential placement were helpful and supportive of her goals to go to college and major in criminal justice. Along with her lawyer, who helped Toni during her time in foster care, was influential in her institutional and major choice. Her support systems insisted that to be in the criminal justice field, Breathe Again College was the place she needed to be. Coupled together, her career aspirations, course experiences in high school, and her support team were influential in her institutional decision. In a broader sense, Toni used several capitals (e.g., aspirations, navigation, linguistics, social, resistant) across her entire college-going process. To illustrate her capitals, for her artifacts, she displayed her undergraduate graduation picture, her framed bachelor's and master's degrees, and left a space on the wall for her future professional degrees, to be hung alongside her other achievements.

Relatedly, attending an institution with a specific academic major was also important to Kioni, who was placed in care at the age of six and then again at fifteen. Like Toni, Kioni wanted to obtain a degree in criminal justice, she stated:

CPS would pay for it, so they made me apply at every single college in the state of [Southwest state]. I applied a good amount of places, got accepted to a good amount of schools, got rejected for a few.....Then I had to choose a college. I was looking at everything. My mindset, we [Kioni, her aunt, and her aunt's girlfriend] had decided on me going in as a general studies major and then me choosing later on down the line. But my mindset was, when I got down the line, I'm going to want to do criminal justice. I had chosen [Mask Off State] because it said that they had a good criminal justice program.

With a GPA of 3.5 coming out of high school, Kioni wanted to attend an institution with a reputable criminal justice program. As Toni has support from her group home staff and others, Kioni had assistance from her aunt and aunt's girlfriend in thinking about what institution to attend. In the end, both their institutional choices were based on schools that offered good criminal justice programs.

Comparable to her other participants, Rashia, also based her first couple of institution choices on where she could pursue a degree in nursing, as it was her first major interest. She states, "They had a program that I was going to do. It was a [Imperial State], [a partner with a 4-year institution for a pathway] program. And I was going for nursing". A place that could offer her the potential of graduating with a nursing degree was an important factor for Rashia across four different institutions, before deciding to change direction, lean in on her passion, and select photography at a different institution. Likewise, for Lauryn, selecting an institution that had a program and or intended major that aligned with her goals was important. She states:

I started to do my research online, of course. I began to really just look into art programs that would benefit me with my head still stuck on focusing on graphic design. I was looking at schools in New York, I was looking at schools or a school in Virginia. Of course, I was looking at schools in [Southeast State]. But slowly but surely because of other events, I ended up kind of focusing more on getting an education in [Southeast State] because of finances..... It was a nice feeling. [University of Doo Wop] was one of my top schools in the sense of everything I needed to have covered. So having the program, the art program, the graphic design program in particular, being local but not super local.

Lauryn, who was placed in the system twice (i.e., 6 & 14 years old), and had a 3.15 GPA in high school describes how she was adamant about attending an institution that had an art major. In addition to offering her desired academic major, the school was financially manageable and conveniently located. As other participants have noted, attending an out-of-state school can be very challenging without sufficient funding, especially for those without financial support from family. Even though she considered art schools outside of Georgia, she found her chosen institution as a more stable (e.g., financially, geographically, interested academic major) opportunity.

Melissa noted a similar reason behind selecting her institution. Compared to her peers, Melissa only entered the foster care system once as she was adopted by an elderly Black couple at the age of 16. Having been a student at two different high schools she was able to graduate with a 3.5 GPA.

I'll say my junior year is when... So first I'll say I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn't do my research as deeply as I wish I had on certain colleges. I didn't know there were HBCUs. So if I did know, I would've been somewhere else, but I wish I would've did more research. It was kind of like I knew I wanted to go and then I had to go so I just googled. Basically, I just googled colleges that had the major that I wanted at the time, which was speech pathology, and [Let It Go University], they had a very good program for that. So that's why I applied here, even though I ended up switching [my major to psychology].

Like the other participants mentioned above, Melissa based her institutional choice on her interested academic major. At that time, she wanted to pursue a degree in speech pathology which aligned with the academic program offered at [Let It Go University]. What is also interesting is that if she had known about HBCU's her institutional choice may have been different. Yet, once again, students' perceptions of their academic majors influenced their decisions about which institutions to enroll in.

As indicated across several themes throughout the findings, some participants (see experiences of Roxanne, Halle, Faith, and Kimberly) chose their institutions because of specific foster care support programs, in tandem with other factors influencing their decision to enroll. Unfortunately, only a few participants knew the campus support programs available before registering. While support programs are instrumental in the success of many different student populations, students with foster care experiences are often in dire need of such programs to help them with access, enrollment, and graduation.

From these students' stories, it can be concluded that there was a sense of both aspirational and navigational capital. Hence, Jill, Toni, Rashia, Lauryn, Kioni, and Melissa saw their college decisions based on being able to imagine themselves in particular majors and career fields. Aspirational capital includes the importance of vision and hope. In addition, they utilized navigational capital, the ability to persevere despite structural obstacles, in order to find their way to their desired institutions that aligned with the academic programs that they wanted to pursue.

Summary

The findings in this chapter reveal that several factors influenced Black college students with foster care backgrounds to choose which institutions of higher education to attend. For many, the availability of specific types of financial aid, such as scholarships, grants, or loans, was crucial in deciding between two-year and four-year colleges. Participants' experiences demonstrated that financial support significantly impacted their consideration of community colleges, PWIs, or HBCUs. Additionally, other participants identified the importance of being close to family and dating partners and taking heed of friends and professional support suggestions as determining factors in their institutional choices. Lastly, participants identified institutions that offered particular academic major programs and had support systems for their

specific needs. Together, these findings relate to previous research and extend what is known about institutional choice, especially for Black college students with foster care backgrounds.

CHAPTER 7: NAVIGATING ACADEMIC MAJOR PATHWAYS: INFLUENCES ON MAJOR CHOICES AMONG BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS FORMERLY IN FOSTER CARE

Choosing an academic major can be a labor-intensive and complex decision for individuals who aspire to complete higher education degrees. Selecting an academic major to study for several years requires research, self-reflection, and understanding of future objectives and/or goals (e.g., graduate school, career pathways, etc.). Other decisions may include selecting a major that would disrupt familial responsibilities, (e.g., major that requires an extra lab at the same time one needs to pick up a child, or a major that requires extra costs for outside materials, or trip explorations), that historically have been taken on by women (Beutel et al., 2018). Additionally, selecting a major requires one to trust one's own ability to make the best decision, and the impact of doubt created by adverse childhood experiences (ACES) in the involvement may impede self-trust. Chapman and colleague's (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice was used to further understand the influential factors surrounding participants' academic major choices. The model was constructed around four major elements: family background and systems of support, K-12 schools and school contexts, state and federal policies, and institutional and social contexts of higher education. This chapter's themes reflect these elements in unrestricted ways, as these constructs serve as parameters that can be intersected and/or overlapped in several areas of the college-going process. The following themes emerged:

- 1) "Because Memories Are a Very Important Thing to Me": Choosing an Arts and Humanities Major to Shape and Cherish Memoirs,
- 2) "I Just Happened to be Good in Science": Choosing an Academic Major in STEM, Health, and Medical Studies,
- 3) "I've Always Been a Person Who's Been Pretty Independent": Factors Influencing Business Major Choice, and
- 4) "My Identity As a

Foster Child Definitely Played a Role”: Insights and Influences of Choosing a Social Science Major.

Table 10.
Participant Degree Types

Degree Types			
Associates	Bachelors	Masters (Art & Science)	Prof Degree (e.g., PhD/EdD/PharmD/JD)
Andre***	Alvin*	Earl*	Earl**
Erykah*	Brandy*	Janet**	Erykah*
Inga*	Dana**	Jill*	Jill**
Janet*	Darius**	Sandra**	Toni*
Jill*	Earl*	Toni*	
Lola**	Eve		
Rashia**	Faith**		
Yolanda***	Gabriella**		
	Halle**		
	Inga*		
	Janet*		
	Jill*		
	Kimberly**		
	Kioni**		
	Lauryn***		
	Lisa**		
	Marlanna**		
	Melissa**		
	Robin**		
	Roxanne**		
	Sandra**		
	Shawntae*		
	Teyana**		
	Toni*		
	Trina*		
	Zakia**		

*Degree completed (graduated)

**Degree in current pursuit

***Degree unfinished/have plans of completing

Table 11.
Participant Academic Major

Academic Major Categories					
Social Sciences	Business	Arts & Humanities	STEM	Health & Medical	Public & Social Services
Alvin	Brandy	Lauryn	Erykah	Lola	Toni
Andre	Eve	Rashia	Teyana	Marlanna	
Dana	Janet	Trina			
Darius	Lisa	Zakia			
Earl	Sandra				
Faith					
Gabriella					
Halle					
Inge					
Jill					
Kimberly					
Kioni					
Melissa					
Robin					
Roxanne					
Shawntae					
Yolanda					

“Because Memories Are a Very Important Thing to Me”: Choosing an Arts and Humanities Major to Shape and Cherish Memoirs

Due to the diverse reasons behind major choices among Black college students with foster care histories, certain patterns emerged for participants in this study within the context of their chosen fields of study. Students' counternarratives and some of their artifacts were interwoven into the emergent patterns to offer nuanced explanations for the phenomena of their academic major choices. Chapman et al.'s (2020) conceptual model affirms that family background and systems often aid students' decisions to go to college and select an institution. This study upholds that the same influences help direct academic major choices. For example, the participants (Lauryn, Rashia, Trina, and Zakia) decided to pursue a degree in the arts and humanities because of their early exposure, passion, and connection to support systems (e.g., families, teachers) for their disciplines. Further, their academic major drove many of their career aspirations. Lauryn's journey to the arts started before she set foot on a college campus to pursue

a bachelor's in Studio Art. Her mother introduced her to the arts, and she identified herself as a “doodler” at a young age. Below, she offers some context on how her mother was a key aspect in her academic major choice and supports her claims by explaining the significance of her artifact:

My mom, she's always been one for the arts. She honestly was my first recollection of understanding the importance of the arts and being able to read and experience life, right? But beyond that, I would be a doodler. I have this little book that we created when I was in kindergarten and it's so funny to look back at that stuff because little me, I do remember, was a bit of a firecracker.

Lauryn, who has aspirations of being an artist, chose a major she was interested in from a very young age. In Lauryn's case, her love for art and her interest in becoming an artist guided her college-going process, from deciding to go to college to selecting an institution and deciding on a major. Some of her earliest and fondest memories involved engaging with her mom over art and being able to imagine and dream through her doodles. Lauryn's impact in pursuing an art major can be attributed to both familial and navigational capital. As her artifact supported her quotation above, she discussed the significance of an art piece she had done. She explains the watercolor painting and archival pen and ink piece of an “inanimate object” that she transformed into a Phoenix in relation to her life (i.e., growing up in the system, homelessness, relationships, and career pathways). She shares:

So coming from my background and everything else prior to college and everything, it reminds me that, I don't know, things can always shed old ways and old things and always grow into an opportunity for something new and better.

Her artwork served as a conscious or subconscious method to continue to recreate herself; she no longer saw herself as an inanimate object, but rather her identification with the Phoenix implied both possibility and reincarnation. Several of Yosso's capitals activated her artifacts. Lauryn's story about her art paints a picture of her utilization of aspirational (i.e., being able to see herself in new ways), navigational (i.e., being able to move through life and art), and family capital (i.e., the love of art she gained from her mother. Moreover, art appears to give her the power to take

charge of her self-identification and future and was not bound by or defined by past circumstances of growing up in the system and experiencing homelessness at various times (e.g., growing up, recently). Creating art served as a way for Lauryn to practice self-expression and escape the various realities she faced growing up and those she faces today; that is, from the young Black girl doodling to the young woman she is now creating masterpieces for various art shows and galleries. She gives additional details about her art and the connection to Black women:

A lot of my work deals with women, of course, mainly Black women because I find a lot of beauty within our community and a lot of strength from how we carry ourselves in this world, in this very unforgiving world, right? I would love to reach a lot more, I guess, alternative Black women or even just Black women who just connect....But anyway, yeah, a lot of my work right now during this process of really building my portfolio, it deals with the perspective of a Black woman, so me, right? But also not saying that I'm only using myself as a reference, I'm using everything from our beauty to the way we carry ourselves, to how we're shaped, to how we express ourselves, even emotionally.

Her identity as a Black woman served as a form of resistance capital, enabling her to highlight and reframe the inequalities surrounding the Black woman's body through her art. As an artist, Lauryn admits that she uses paintings to emphasize Black beauty and, more importantly, different types of Black women. In addition, using art she celebrates the beauty and strength of Black women. Her comprehensive approach to portraying Black women in strength-based ways demonstrates their tenacity and endurance, as well as their ability to persevere in the face of an unforgiving world. In a way, her artwork helps her to communicate her own account about adversity and survival. As she stated above, art enables her to communicate the stories of Black women in non-monolithic ways. Social, resistant, and linguistic capital are assisting her in developing her portfolio through her artwork and interpretation.

In comparison, the same passion and interest in art as Lauryn also came across in Rashia's major choice. Rashia's passion for photography began when she received her first

camera [polaroid] while in foster care; now, equipped with a digital camera, she is pursuing degrees and a career as a graphic designer and photographer. Rashia began taking pictures of items while she was in foster care as a little girl. Despite starting out as a nursing major, she ultimately found her way back to the arts as she explained it was her passion. That is, using her camera to capture moments in time she does not want to forget. As shared in Chapter 6 (institutional choice findings) her artifact was a camera. She offers, “Because memories are a very important thing to me. Taking photos of my mom, my sister, my dad, my animals and my best friends. That's top tier. I love doing it.” The camera offers her an opportunity to catch good “memories,” as she shared in our interview that this past Christmas holiday was the first time her family (e.g., familial capital) had been together in years, and the camera played a major role in capturing the moment. While in foster care and now as a college student, she valued making good memories. Although she noted that her time in foster care was often chaotic, having a camera allowed her to capture some moments of enjoyment (e.g., resistant capital) in nature and with friends (e.g., social capital), who were influential in her institutional decision and the subject of many of her photographs. The camera acted as a portal for her to stay connected and hold on to relationships as she navigated the challenges of foster care and life. Photographs also allowed her to look back at her family members (i.e., familial capital) and remember their support, making her feel less alone. But the photo itself has another purpose; that is, being able to see the photograph again serves as evidence that she is capable of creating an image, and capable of examining light/color/placement/point of view so it serves to remind her of a skillset in how to see the world or how to “frame” it.

Along with Lauryn and Rashia, Trina's major choice was also based on a passion for music she developed at a younger age and a connection to potential career pathways. Trina who graduated in 2020 offers:

My dad was a DJ. At five years old, my dad looked at me and said, [Trina], what do you want to be when you grow up? And I told him I wanted to be a singer. And so when he passed away, when I was eight years old, that was always something I wanted to stick with.

From her quotation above it is evident that Trina had an early interest in music. An interest that started with her father and his career helped shape her academic and future career trajectories.

Trina's artifact served as a reminder of her familial capital and aspirational capital. From a young age, education was crucial for Trina, and her conversation with her father about her career aspirations highlighted two key areas of focus: choosing to attend college and selecting an academic major. Thus, these two aspects of the college-going process complemented and supported each other. As Trina made it known, music helped her hide behind a lot of pain: "You mask the pain, you mask all the things you go through. I could hide that behind the music".

Lauryn, Rashia, and Trina past experiences served as motivating factors to tell their stories through art. Art was used as an outlet (i.e., coping skill) to creatively and artistically showcase the ways they survived. Further, Trina explains that she is currently not in a music career role; however, she wants to be: "I'm at a crossroads right now, because I want to sing. I want to sing, but there's so many factors that play a part in maybe it might not be the time to sing, or I should just go out and do it. It's kind of confusing in that regard". At the time of her graduation, a factor was COVID-19, as it slowed down opportunities for everyone. Her artifact endorsed her major choice and the factors that stopped her career pathway as a singer. She shared:

This is actually currently my music book from my last recital that I was supposed to have in 2020. It was going to be my final senior recital. That did not happen, of course, because of COVID. This was all four languages. So English, German, Italian and French. I remember going and talking with them [music faculty] and rehearsing for about 45

minutes and then getting a message from one of my professors saying, yeah, let's talk about this COVID thing and this coronavirus." I'm like, [Dr. Porter], they're not going to shut nothing down? This is going to be fine for us. Then they told don't come back next week. Then it was like, don't come back for two more weeks, then it was don't come back at all. I couldn't afford to move to [city], which is the closest major city, I couldn't afford to move back.

Speaking further about her post-graduation plans she added:

I started researching. And so corporate bands popped up, and I couldn't figure out how to get into a corporate band, still trying to figure out how to get into a corporate band, but Norwegian Cruise Lines popped up. And Carnival popped up. And so I was like, "I could do this." And the audition process was pretty simple. You could do it virtual, or you can do it in person. And I started to see how much money people made, and I also had a passion for traveling, after going to London and China, I was like, "Shoot, that's the way to do it. Let me do this.... My plans was to go to the cruise lines, COVID shut the cruise lines down first.

Trina's disgust with COVID-19 is understandable given that it prohibited her from doing so many things that were linked with numerous milestone markers related to her college-going journey and musical goals. Furthermore, such experiences underscore the additional difficulties that come with being a foster youngster and lacking the financial or familial support to relocate to a safe and stable environment, even in the event of a worldwide crisis. COVID-19 extinguished her fire, the ability to traditionally finish college as she had begun, to prove others wrong, to bear the weight of her family, and to uphold the promise she had made to her father.

Since they were young girls, these three 26-year-old women had a connection to or were inspired by the arts: Trina has had a passion for music, a connection that spawned from her relationship with her father, almost similar to Lauryn's connection to her mother by way of art and Rashia's connection to capturing relationships with family and friends through photography. Above, participants articulate stories that have a possible connection to aspirational and resistance capital. As aspirational capital refers to individuals envisioning themselves in other roles and or places outside their current state of being (e.g., in a particular career field).

Furthermore, their creative acts serve as a form of resistance capital that assists them to artistically tell their stories despite the adversity in their lives. As Lousie De Salvo asserts in her text *Writing as a Way of Healing and Telling our Stories* that “creativity is a basic human response to trauma and a natural emergency defense system” the participants in the arts and humanities engaged in creative outlets, which turned into academic major choices to align with their essence and thrive despite systemic obstacles.

Like her peers, Zakia had an early interest in history. Her passion and early exposure to the discipline of history shaped how she understood her passion and its relation to her future aspirations of being a teacher and college professor. She shares:

With history, I always loved history. As a kid, it was just always my favorite subject and I always did well in history, and I just love learning about past events, future events. Yeah, so I think that's why history for me. I feel like it's important. I feel like although it's history in textbooks, it's also history in us.

Zakia developed a love for history at a young age. As her favorite subject in school growing up she naturally gravitated towards history as her academic major. As her quotation above offers, she understood that history is all around us and not just in the form of academic textbooks. Comparable to the other participants in Chapter 6, a love for learning was developed at a young age. Zakia’s passion for learning blossomed through her aspirations to attend college and pursue a career as a history teacher. Further, she expounds on when she first fell in love with the discipline.

I feel like we learned a lot about American history in middle school, but I think high school... So, I went to American History High School, which the keyword American history. But when I took [Ms. Jackson’s] class, we learned about, the Renaissance Era. I think that piece I just took in with. It just was different from what I learned in previous courses, and we went into the poetry pieces, some of the artists and the poets and some of the work that came out of it, and we got to create our own piece. So, I think that part I really liked is learning about when the Renaissance Era.

Her passion and early interest in history were supported by her teacher, who exposed her to various forms of history by way of the arts. A new exposure that allowed her to think differently and outside the norms of what history can be. In comparison to Lauryn and her artifact (i.e., painting of the flower phoenix) a bird that is often transformed and reborn has connections to Zakia and her passion for history, especially the Renaissance Era, which was classified as the rebirth or transformation of civilization. There is a consistent pattern between those with foster care experiences and a desire to reconstruct themselves. From all the participant's quotations what arises across their experiences is the love and connection to the major and individuals or particular experiences within their lives. There is a desire to hold on to portions (e.g., memories, relationships, parental/child hobbies) of their lives through their interests and academic majors. As seen from their experience familial capital (e.g., dad, mom, family), aspirational capital (e.g., career pathways), and linguistic capital (e.g., language, understanding) were activated in their pursuits of their academic majors in the arts and humanities.

“I Just Happened to be Good in Science”: Choosing an Academic Major in STEM, Health, and Medical Studies

Early interests and exposure to STEM and the Health and Medical fields also played a significant role in shaping the academic major choices of participants in this study. For some, that interest and early exposure came from being skilled in or having a strong understanding of a particular academic discipline. Pulling from Chapman and colleagues (2020) family and K-12 schools and school contexts shaped how some participants decided on choosing majors in STEM, health and medical fields. Two participants classified as being in STEM-related fields, Erykah, 32, who graduated with a bachelor's in chemistry and STEM related doctoral degree, and Teyana, 19, majoring in math education but considering switching to finance, shared the

factors that played into their major choices. When asked to elaborate on her chemistry major, Erykah explained:

I know you had talked about if my major was always chemistry. It wasn't. I definitely went in undeclared. When I got there [Appletree College], it was more so my friend group. A lot of my friends were pre-med and all of that, and I just took the classes that they took and I just so happened to be good at science.

As previously stated, Erykah arrived at Appletree unsure about her academic goals. However, once she was with her friends, her social capital influenced her academic major choice. Being in classes with friends influenced her decision to pursue a specific major. According to this study's findings and Chapman and colleagues (2020), peers frequently influence students' institutional choices. Conversely, friends and peers often impact academic major decisions as well (Pu et al., 2021; Rubineau et al., 2024). Having a friend in the same program increases prospects for resilience inside the major and potential overall academic achievement. When asked to clarify how she knew she “happened to be good at science” and how she “found that” she liked chemistry she offered:

I actually took AP Chem in high school and I completely forgot about that. So we take general science classes in high school. Then you actually had to be recommended by a teacher to take any of the AP courses. At that time, I think chemistry was the highest science course I had, and so they recommended me for AP Chem. And I think that's also what gravitated me towards that because of the intro courses I had seen in high school, and so you gravitate towards the things that you're good at.

As Erykah stated above, her college major choice was influenced by two different factors. In the quote above, she says that teachers helped her develop academic confidence in chemistry. Being validated by her teachers aided in the development of her scientific strengths. Not only does she demonstrate her brilliance, but it also emphasizes that she is greater than the dominant narrative often placed on Black youths with foster care backgrounds. As a result, her teachers, as well as her friends, legitimized her social capital. Furthermore, the AP classes she completed helped her

strengthen her linguistic capital, which aided her ability to be good at science. In addition, navigational capital was employed by maneuvering her way through various education channels to decide on her academic major. Being surrounded by friends pursuing STEM degrees, her early exposure, fondness, and knowledge of chemistry all helped keep her on the path to graduation not once but twice. As with Teyana, her earlier exposure to math and teacher validations also influenced her academic major choice. Teyana, a Black Jamaican woman who wants to become a lawyer like her mentor, affirms that her academic major choice was aligned with a discipline for which she had a passion. She shared:

My academic strength is math. I love math a lot. I've always passed my math class... I never struggled in math. Well, in college I did, but hey... I've never struggled in math. So when I was picking my major... I actually want to go to law school, like I said before, but I didn't understand the process at all. My mentor [Black man], he's a lawyer and he told me that before you go to law school, you can choose any major you want to do or whatever. So I was like, oh, okay. So, I said math.

And similar to Erykah, Teyana expounded on how she came to understand math was her “academic strength”. She contributed:

The teachers, they recommended ... they would recommend students to take this class or get put in this class. So my ninth grade year happened, I had honors classes and dual enrollment classes, so that's when that started for me.

For Teyana there was confidence and an understanding in her skill set with math, similar to that of Erykah and chemistry. Not only did she get recommended for honors courses, but she also registered and took courses for college credit as a dual enrollment student. Together, these two experiences validated her in several different academic ways. The first was that teachers believed in her abilities to excel in more rigorous classrooms. Secondly, taking college-level courses further supported her scholastic abilities and allowed her to see future possibilities away from her adverse childhood experiences. Thus, underscoring both social and aspirational capitals.

Erykah and Teyana equally shared journals as their artifacts. Erykah discussed how she uses her leather journal to collect quotes to keep her motivated from as far back as high school, as she shares one of her favorites: “This was one that I got in high school, and I thought it really spoke to me. It's by Ayn Rand and it says, ‘The question isn't who's going to let me, it's who's going to stop me?’ And so just giving myself some ammo as we go through.” For Teyana, her journal is often used for words that she comes across that she wants to remember and use to “expand my [her] vocabulary”. As both women faced homelessness between their high school graduation and their first day of higher education, they utilized social (i.e., friends, teachers, mentors), linguistic (e.g., prior exposure), and navigational (e.g., Black identities, foster care experiences, journals) forms of capital in their academic major choice journeys. Taken together, their quotations and artifacts were interwoven with their navigational capitals, as both women used journals as educational outlets that assisted them in moving through various spaces (e.g., foster care, school, life). The journals allowed for reflexivity and self-development along their various pathways.

Participants Lola and Marlana, both second years in their respective health and medical-related majors, indicated that early interests and passions to help people were also prominent factors in their major choices. Lola, a first-generation student, came to her institution without a declared academic major. However, talking to her academic advisor assisted her in deciding on an academic major. Lola explains:

I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do at first. I was thinking more of a RN or LPN when I first got started, well my advisor for the last, at least, I think a year and a half, she has helped me figure out a lot more stuff about what I want to do. She asked me what I want to do, I wasn't really sure, and she says, "Well, since you like blood and everything else, what about EMT?" She told me I could do phlebotomy, which is almost something dealing with blood and poking people, but it's more in a hospital setting. I gave it a shot.

In a conversation with her advisor, Lola was able to circle back to an interest she had developed before entering the foster care system. While Lola had some majors she was interested in, her counselor assisted in pairing her interest with an academic major. Scholars note that high school counselors can be helpful or problematic in the college-going experiences of students (McDonough & Carone, Chapman 2020). Equally, academic advisors on higher education campuses can create positive and challenging experiences for their students (Johnson et al., 2023). For Lola, her academic advisor was influential as she knew about her outside the context of just an academic transactional relationship (e.g., advisor-advisee). When asked how her advisor knew about her liking of blood she replied:

My dad used to kill hogs and stuff and that was pretty cool...cutting it and seeing the guts and stuff. And my mom was a nurse herself. It runs in the family.

Familial, social, and navigational capital assisted in guiding Lola's decision to major in phlebotomy. For Lola, her interests were developed by her early exposure from her family and then further manifested by her academic advisor. Moreover, wanting to stay connected and close to her biological parents, she chose an academic major that reflected things she remembered growing up. This decision was significant because it provided her with memories that allowed her to reflect on a time before she was placed in foster care.

Marlanna, who has future plans of attending medical school, expressed an early interest and/or curiosity in their academic major, medical studies, as their undergraduate major. They shared:

I think I always was really interested in health sciences and things like that. I think, especially when I was younger, I used to be really particular about cleanliness and staying healthy and stuff like that. So instead of now, then it was more of a picky thing. I just didn't like certain stuff. But it's because I understand why it's important now, instead of just like, it's my preference because I understand the importance. I think that also grew into why I want to be a part of that, of just like a movement of finding ways to help people the best, I think; just because I'm more interested in science and health sciences,

that's how I'm going to pursue in that movement as far as just helping people and helping people get better.

As Marlanna explains above, their academic major was cultivated from an early interest in the sciences. As revealed by their quotation, they are walking in partnership with their aspirational capital. Their interest developed from a sense of cleanliness and its relation to wanting to improve an individual's overall health. Marlanna aspires to positively change people's lives through the medical discipline, an interest that developed for them at a young age and was later further cultivated in high school. Further explaining their major decision influences, they shared about watching a virtual medical panel in high school during COVID-19. They shared:

In high school, during COVID, so it was all virtual, but it was associated with a university medical school. I can't remember the exact name of the program, but it introduced students into the medical field and the path. It was a panel of a whole bunch of different doctors. They had surgeons there, they had all different kinds of specialist doctors there as well. Each of them explained their path as far as where they started in school and then just how they got to where they are right now as far as what they're practicing.

In watching the panel, it is possible that Marlanna envisioned themselves in the future about their path and experiences through various medical programs. Aspirational capital assisted Marlanna in seeing themselves past a high schooler trying to survive the stressors of COVID-19 and the experiences of being a foster care youth. Early interest and exposure to the STEM field influenced their academic major decisions for undergraduate degrees and beyond.

All of the participants in this section, Erykah, Teyana, Lola and Marlanna chose their academic majors due to an early interest in STEM, health, and medical fields. Research has shown that early interests, or the absence thereof, often play a significant role in influencing college students' choices of academic majors, especially for those in STEM and/or STEM-adjacent fields (Burt & Johnson, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). In support of the quotations above, various forms of community culture wealth capitals (e.g., aspiration, familial, navigational,

linguistic, social) served as sources of knowledge for academic major influences of participants in this section.

“I’ve Always Been a Person Who’s Been Pretty Independent”: Factors Influencing Business Major Choice

The racial and social environment, both within institutions and society at large, frequently dictates Black students' decisions to attend college and choose an institution (Chapman 2020). This influence also extends to their academic major choices. Importantly, the racialized and sociocultural context of job and employment opportunities often guides the academic major considerations of Black women in relation to their professional goals and trajectories. For instance, Brandy, Eve, Janet, Lisa, and Sandra, who collectively spent over 36 years in foster care and experienced more than 38 different placements, all chose to pursue academic majors within the business field of study. For them, choosing a major in business strengthened their high-level of independence and helped them learn industry fundamentals. This was especially pertinent for the participants who had their own existing or prospective businesses. For instance, Brandy offers:

I've always been super independent. Well, I think because of how we grew up, I didn't have a choice but to be independent. We [sibling] had to be the grownups. We had to be more mature than the other kids that are outside playing at the park, not a care in the world. Because when I go in the house, I don't know how I'm going to find my mother. I don't know what's going to happen. It's like, I don't know if we're going to be eating Oodles of Noodles today or peanut butter and jelly, or if we're going to have actual real food. There were times when we would go to the grocery store because she sold her food stamps and we learned how to steal at a really young age. Yeah, it was a mess.

Above, Brandy’s quotation outlines how she had to become independent at a very young age. As Brandy asserts, there was no childhood for her and her sister. They did not have the ability to be carefree in their daily lives. She had to activate not only resistant capital but also navigation capital and familial capital from a young age. Although all the knowledge she acquired may not be considered traditional, it was knowledge needed to survive. As her mother was a substance

abuser, she and her sister had to always be prepared and able to take care of themselves. As she asserts, the uncertainty did not provide stable situations for her growing up. Her experiences growing up aided in her decision to pursue a major in business to support her own rising company. She states:

Business administration with a minor in small business management, and it's actually not because I want to run a company. I think by the way we grew up made me super, probably hyper independent at this point. So it is only in my nature that I want my own business. I want to work for myself.....Because I already had the business and why would I major in something that's not going to benefit that business?

Brandy, who graduated in 2023, expressed that a business degree was crucial for maintaining her independence and benefiting her own business. This has turned into a generational lesson as her son started his own t-shirt business and her daughter is looking at ways to pursue international business in college. Therefore, this illustrates navigational, resistant, and familial capital, as well as some linguistic capital, given that both Brandy's children are learning about business in various ways. She shared, "I think he's going to lean more towards business too. He started a T-shirt company, so he does T-shirts and hoodies and things like that, customized". In addition, she discussed the educational pursuits of her daughter, "She has her [associates], so she's trying to figure out what exactly is next, she's knocked out all the basic classes and now she's just like, "There's so many options", but she's leaning towards international business". As learned early, Brandy's children motivated her to go to college, and even in her major selection and parenting style, she showcases how to be independent and not need to rely on anyone. Instead, people should keep their independence and create stability for themselves. Through her choices, Brandy appears to be breaking cycles and creating stability for herself as well as her family.

Correspondingly, Janet, who held an associate's in business administration with a focus on management, a bachelor's in consumer economics with a focus on financial planning, and is

currently pursuing an MBA at a PWI in the Midwest offered, “it can't hurt my small business to meet new people and build an alumni network.” She shared how she envisions her graduate degree playing a significant role in her “small business” that she started as a high school student at the age of 17. Again, like Brandy, Janet wanted to create stability for herself and not need to rely on others for survival.

While Eve did not have current aspirations to start her own business, her experiences growing up were similar to those of Brandy and Janet, their academic business major decisions were connected to their identities of independence. Eve stated, “I've always been a person who's been pretty independent because growing up, I lived in so many different places, and went to so many different group homes by myself. I didn't go with anybody else. They're not telling you like, “You're going to go with this buddy.” No, you go by yourself”. Traversing the foster care system as a Black young female alone, more often than not activated her navigational capital, which was also used to get to her institution of choice and to her major choice. Eve also added that growing up she was poor, homeless and as a foster youth was often reminded of those pieces of her life, “They [kids at school] were making fun of me for the way I dress and stuff like that, and obviously, like you're in foster care. I don't have any money. It was just a really traumatic time in my life”. From these experiences she wanted a degree in business, she offered:

My major is business and applied technology ... I've always been into money and finances because growing up I didn't have a lot of money and I wanted to make sure that going into my adult life that I would be financially stable and understand money and understand about savings, savings accounts, and 401(k), and stuff like that. I wanted to make sure that I'm always stable in my adult life because that's money ... I feel like money is something that could stress anyone out, but I just always wanted to make sure that I'm always financially stable.

Eve's major choice was influenced by her economic experiences growing up. That is, being poor, homeless, and in foster care shaped her decision to pursue a bachelor's degree in business. For Eve, a business degree equates to stability, an opportunity for her to be stress-free and free

from financial barriers. Additionally, Eve, Brandy, and Janet's identities around being independent may have some connection to the entrepreneurial spirit and their desires to be more stable in life.

As with, Brandy, Eve, and Janet, Lisa chose a business major to also have some independence from the workforce. Several times she stated or made some acknowledgments that, "I quickly realized that I don't like working for people." Due to her medical diagnosis, which frequently impacted her life in numerous ways, Lisa's negative experiences with the healthcare system motivated her to establish her nonprofit and choose her major in business health care administration. Lisa explained:

I live in [West state] the majority white state. Most of my doctors are white. I've ran into so many racial-related things where I had to switch doctors. There's certain emergency rooms that I won't visit now, because of some of the things that were said, like, "Some people can handle more pain than others," crazy stuff like that. I was like, "What about me says that?" And then they go red in the face

In talking further, she spoke her medical experiences influenced her nonprofit:

I really wanted to start something. I didn't see it, so I wanted to start it, and that's why I started the nonprofit. I wanted to get my degree in business healthcare administration so I can learn the business side of healthcare, because obviously that's what makes things go round. That's why I chose that. It is been really helping with the launch and the structure of my nonprofit, which has been great. I've been learning a lot, and I've been able to apply a lot.

From Yosso (2020), navigational and resistance capital drove Lisa's decisions toward her business major. Having endured many unpleasant experiences in healthcare she created her own business. The historically poor treatment of Black women in medical spaces continues to bring harm to the Black community. A number of scholars, journalists, and activists have called attention to such horrific experiences (Campbell, 2021; Okoro et al., 2020 Villarosa, 2018; 2022). Furthermore, enrolling in a business academic program has benefited her in regard to

advancing her nonprofit. Lisa used her personal racialized experiences and educational pursuits to further enact change in the health care system for others and stability for herself.

Just as Lisa utilized her business classes to propel her nonprofit forward, Sandra focused her academic pursuits on understanding the intricacies of launching and sustaining a company through her business courses. Sandra who has inspirations to attend officer training school and law school after completing her business degree mentioned the following about the factors that influenced her major choice:

So the entrepreneurship business is because I'm going to open a series of nonprofit chains that circle profits from citizens to former foster youths, so they can have different services and resources and college funds, and different things like that, that can help them and promote them into becoming and establishing their skills, to be the leaders of America that they are supposed to be.

Like other participants, Sandra has ambitions of establishing her own business. As her quotation above suggests, she entered an institutional business program to learn about the discipline and gain insight to use in establishing her own nonprofit. A business that could offer some stability to her and to the children and adolescents in the foster care system. Influenced by her aspirational capital, Sandra was able to identify a dire need for children. Having a nonprofit, as she envisioned, would offer future generations of children in need the services, resources, and guidance Sandra did not receive during her time in care.

Brandy, Eve, Janet, Lisa, and Sandra demonstrated both navigational capitals and aspirational, as they managed to marshal their way through various systems to understand their placements in the business world. Moreover, more precisely, for these women their aspirations to fill various gaps in available services steered them toward their academic majors. At the same time, these women sought to keep their independence. Giving them the ability to be their own bosses without having to seek approval or wait for others to decide their outcomes.

“My Identity as a Foster Child Definitely Played a Role”: Insights and Influences of Choosing a Social Science Major

Social science is a large field that often comprises an array of disciplines and sub-disciplines. For example, often social science is shown to incorporate majors or be interdisciplinary and include underpinnings of anthropology, economics, political science, and psychology (Porter & Serra, 2020). However, depending on the institution several other majors are also classified under the social science discipline. In addition, majors such as (but not limited to) child development, criminology/criminal justice, cultural studies, education, global studies sociology, history, and urban planning tend to be categorized under social science across different institutions of higher education. Participants across all the academic disciplines in this study discussed how they wanted to utilize their degrees to help people. However, a subset of participants in this study majoring in the social sciences discipline, selected their academic majors based on the help they received growing up, their propensity to support and help others in general, and their desire to help people who looked like them (i.e., Black). A degree that permits degree holders to use their knowledge to serve others was an important consideration in major selection.

“She Made Me Feel Like She Genuinely Cared”: How Genuine Support Shaped Social Science Major Choice

Individuals (e.g., teachers, counselors, friends) who form a student's support system often influence their college-going decision-making (Chapman et al., 2020). For Inga, Kioni, and Toni, the help received from various support systems growing up aided in their choice of social science degrees. For instance, Inge Inga, who had graduated with her associate's and bachelor's, was about to start her master's degree a few months after our conversation shared how her therapist influenced her academic major choice:

I thought about it and I was like, who's the one person in my life that I feel like really changed my life for the better? My therapist. So I was like, oh man. I started doing research in [Midwest state]. I was like, well, what do I got to study to be a therapist? Psychology. So then that's how I landed on that.

Inge, who aspires to pursue a doctoral degree, shared that her therapist, an Indian woman, significantly helped her during foster care. The care and support shown by her therapist stimulated social and aspiration capital. As her quotation unveils, her therapist played a vital role in her life, as she helped Inga through a lot as a young woman and subsequently inspired her major choice. Although Inga “ghosted” her many times at the start of her relationship she asserted that the therapist's consistency and care eventually won her over:

One day I remember walking out and this lady was sitting there. I recognized her car, she rolled down the window. She said, “hi, Inga”. I said, “oh God”. I remember I got in her car and we were talking and she was like, I genuinely care about you, and you need help and I want to help you. I was like, okay. So just the fact that she cares so much, and she would always go above and beyond and make sure that I was seeing her, and actually caring for myself and getting the help that I needed.

As Inga highlights in her quotations above, the person who impacted her life the most and even fought for her when she made several attempts to avoid her, in a way shaped her academic choice. In an earlier chapter (i.e., Chapter 6) we learned that Inga did not have many supportive people in her life and was not used to having someone fight for her. Having such a person in a foster care youth's life can ultimately be a “life-changing ” relationship that possibly leads to increased levels of self-efficacy, confidence, and purpose.

A positive relationship with a case worker aided Kioni in selecting her academic major. She started out by offering “I'd say mainly because of the last caseworker that I told you about. All my other caseworkers that I had, they didn't make it seem like they had my best interests at heart”. Kioni explained that her case worker, a white woman, made her feel seen and heard,

something she did not get from the others she had worked with prior. Kioni talked about her case worker Brooke, and how their relationship influenced her major choice:

[Brooke] would come all the way from [Southwest State] to [Southeast State] to see me. Most caseworkers I know would just call you over the phone then just come see you. Because when I lived in [city], none of my caseworkers from [city] that I had were driving all the way to [city-5 hours away] to see me. They would just call me every single month. She was actually every single month driving out to come...She would get a plane, fly out to come see me in person. And I remember I asked her about it, why does she do that? Doesn't that cost a lot of money? And she was like, "Yeah, but I was able to get the CPS department to approve that because I explained to them, you could tell me you're fine over the phone because your aunt could be sitting right there beside you, but I need to see you in person to talk to you and make sure you're okay."

Although Kioni was no longer in care, she and her case worker still have a close bond. She shares:

I have her phone number to this day. We still text. She's seen pictures of my kids. She's sent my kids things. She'll come visit me and seen me, make sure I'm okay. She'll tell me, "I'm proud of you for doing this." So she's always been there. So that made me want to be a social worker due to the fact that I don't want it to be just a paycheck. [Brooke] didn't make it feel like it was just a paycheck for me. She made me feel like she genuinely cared while all the other caseworkers made it seem like it was just a check, like I was just a number or name or whatever in their system. Just this kid is going to get me into the foster care system. And that's what all the other caseworkers made it seem like to me.

Kioni's motivation in choosing social work as a major resulted from the positive experiences she had with her caseworker Brooke. Like Inga and her therapist, Kioni and her case worker developed a strong relationship. Social capital guided and activated her academic major decisions. Kioni was no longer the abused and battered child no one saw, as her case worker made her feel seen, heard, and cared for. Even after Kioni left the foster care system their relationship continued to grow and develop. Brooke was fully invested in Kioni, and later on extended that same care to her children as well. The level of support and care influenced Kioni to a major where she could take on a similar role in the future.

Much like Inga and Kioni, Toni also received support growing up, which helped shape her academic and career aspirations. Since she was a young girl, Toni aspired to become a lawyer, an early ambition that influenced many of her academic major choices. Toni mentioned:

I shared with you that when there was one particular time that I had went to court right before I was remanded to the juvenile's detention center, and my legal aid law guardian allowed me to stay with her, and she said that she would be the one to drive me to the detention center. I stayed with her and I was able to watch what she did, and she was advocating for so many of the young people in terms of assessing what they needed, asking the judge, "Okay, can you not send them to this place? This place may be better for them." And I had saw what she did, and I had watched what she did, and I said to her, "I want to do that." And she gave me the roadmap in terms of, okay, here's what you need to do. So that was a pivotal moment for me in terms of saying, okay, well, I know that I need to graduate high school in order to get to college, which would be the first step.

For Toni, a court appearance is where she chose to work towards becoming a lawyer. Seeing her law guardian work in the courtroom inspired her to pursue her chosen career path. The law guardian gave her the “roadmap” which helped her solidify her bachelor’s degree choice in the field of criminal justice. She added:

In high school, we had criminal justice courses, which were electives, and I did very well in my criminal justice courses, which made sense because I was very interested in it because after seeing my law guardian and what she did, I had known that I had wanted to do that, but not working with youth, but working with offenders. I had said to myself, "You know what? I'm really good in criminal justice."

For Toni, her law guardian provided her with the pathway to becoming a lawyer, while her high school criminal justice classes reinforced her determination to pursue her bachelor’s degree and career pathways. For example, her social capital intersected with her linguistic capital, and both supported her aspirational capital. All the capitals working together helped influence her academic major decisions. The relationship with her lawyer reinforced her social capital, as she saw her lawyer in action many times in the courtroom, which also provided her with linguistic capital through those courtroom experiences alongside the high school course she took. Together those two capitals allowed her to see her own future as a lawyer.

These three women who majored in the social sciences were inspired by those who helped them the most growing up. Inga, Kioni, and Toni were able to establish positive relationships, something they had not previously done. All the adults in their lives caused them

harm, were unreliable, and did not provide the necessary care for a child who had grown up dealing with pain and trauma. These participants' academic major decisions were influenced by the women who protected and cared for them the most. Between the three women, social, aspirational, and linguistic forms of capital assisted in the development and shaping of Inga, Kioni, and Toni's academic major choices in the social sciences.

“Who Makes the Red Tape?” How a Desire to Help Others Shaped Social Sciences Academic Major Choice

Throughout the data collection process, participants reflected on their lives and experiences, emphasizing that help was often hard to find. From these reflections, their desire to help others in need emerged. More particularly Roxanne, Andre, Earl, Darius, and Jill elaborate on the ways they want to accentuate help and make an impact in the world, more specifically, the various systems they were a part of growing up. For instance, Roxanne who was living in a homeless shelter from 16 years old until she moved to her college campus provides her insights on her passion to help other people:

Really it comes down to just like I want to be that resource for kids who were in the system and went through abuse or traumatic situations. I want to be that resource for them where they feel comfortable to talk about their experiences and help them process in a way that didn't help me process what I was going through. I don't want people to feel they're alone ever in the situation. I know one thing that I've struggled with what has it been. Coming up on five, six years that I've been out of my toxic household is that I faced a lot of the blame on myself, just like how things went down, even though my family made their own decisions in that home and everybody is entitled decisions and nobody forced them to do anything. So that's literally their fault and I can't blame myself for it. I feel like a lot of kids in the system, they blame themselves for what they've been through because I feel like it's almost maybe as a trauma response, so to say, as the things always being their fault to begin with. Parents being like, "You deserve this. You did this." That big manipulating game and they never really let that go. Even once they leave their toxic household. I really want to help kids understand that you didn't ask for what happened to you and no matter how bad you were or what you did, that didn't warrant your parents abusing you or sexually assaulting you to teach a lesson. There are so many other ways to get a point across to help you have better behavior. So that was a big thing that really pushed me to go into psychology.

In the quote above, Roxanne not only considers her own personal circumstances but also stresses how imperative it is to help other kids who are going through similar things as she did. Like all the participants in this study, Roxanne's story is a story of survival and resilience. Her experiences as a foster care youth equipped her with various forms of capital. Her major selection was inspired by her ability and desire to awaken and encourage others' capital. Roxanne's academic major will create a space for her to translate and give children the ability to traverse through different systems, build transformative relationships, work towards their goals, and create distance between themselves and the dominant narrative about kids with foster care experiences. Her academic major choice was motivated not just by her experiences, but also by her devotion to play a role in providing kids a listening ear and guidance.

Likewise, helping people was also an influential factor for Jill. A veteran and current doctoral student in education, who emphasized multiple times in both interviews the importance of helping people and its relation to her academic major decision, she provides:

My identity as a foster child definitely played a role into it. That is really what shaped my initial perception of helping. This foster mom took myself and my sister in at the same time. And that's pretty unheard of in the foster care system for siblings to be put together. And especially back then in the '80s, that's very rare. So that was really my first view of somebody that didn't know me, helping me. Had she not helped, I don't know where my sister and I would be, honestly.

As Jill describes above, her drive to help people was first constructed during her time as a foster care youth. She and her sister were taken in by their foster mom, a Black woman who took care of them during their first time placed in foster care. Jill, who experienced foster care at a different time than the majority of the participants in this study, highlights how she first came to her understanding of helping. Through her adoptive mom, there was a transfiguration of familial capital and how one can receive and give help. Through the relationship with her adoptive mother, she began to develop a deeper level of understanding of what help was, as she and her

sister had not experienced such a thing for many years. To further emphasize her drive to help people, more especially kids she offers:

I feel very comfortable helping people. I know that's what I was called here to do, is to help people, specifically kids. Just my trauma, my background in that trauma, I feel like God has put me here for that reason, so I can't explain it.

In addition, she states:

If I see someone in need, I make it my position to say, "How can we fix your situation?" and I've always been like that. It drives me crazy when I see a child hurting, because it makes me think about my own childhood, my own trauma, especially kids who have parents for an addict. So that's what drove me to the human services' management degrees, is wanting to help people.

Similar to Roxanne, Jill's nature to want and help kids originated from their own experiences in the foster care system. Furthermore, as Jill mentions above, her academic major decisions and her desire to help children stem from a spiritual calling from God, her experiences with a biological parent who was an addict, and an adoptive mom who helped her reimagine what it meant to help. Jill's capitals (i.e., family, navigation, aspirational, resistance) encouraged her to stay motivated and select an academic degree that will allow her to serve and support others, particularly children.

Likewise, Andre, his degree pursuits were guided by his experiences growing up. Andre who has experienced 43 different placements as a "dual-status" youth (involving both juvenile justice and foster care systems), and attended 41 different schools throughout his K-12 education, discussed his major selection across three different institutions he was enrolled in over a course of several years:

I chose that because when I finally decided to do what I do because I have dropped out of school which we talked about before. I started out criminal justice, wanting to do specifically law, become a judge. Switched to social work because it's just like, "I want to help people." Switched to social work to political science, what I do now essentially. And each switch came with its own obstacles and different things like that. The reason I left the judicial side is because I felt as though, and I still feel, it's a percent of the problem.

Then when I got to social work, I saw all the red tape and I was like, "Who makes the red tape?" I started asking questions like that, "Who says this is where you can't..." And that's where I got into the political side and I'm still engaging in both of those sectors very heavily.

Andre mentioned candidly in the quotation above about his multiple efforts at education and his exploration of several disciplines that better align with his career path. Above, Andre describes how he accessed various forms of capital at the intersection of his experiences. His navigation and aspirational capital were activated by his time spent in other academic disciplines. Through these interactions with external and internal factors, he was guided to the major where he felt he belonged and could do the work needed to help others. Moreover, Andre briefly discusses his experience trying to retrieve files about his own life from the court system and the envelope that served as his artifact, an item that further supported his points about the barriers or the "rep tape" that often prevent people from progressing, especially for those who have been in a part of carceral systems (e.g., foster care, juvenile detention, prison). He goes on to explain how he would help people by using his political science degree to make legislative changes.

I could write a legislation to ensure that each person who's been impacted by the juvenile system and by the foster care system get their file in hand. If it is not going to harm the caseworker or what have you, making sure that you redact the names that's needed but provide the information to help them heal. A lot of people, I've learned from getting my own file and trying to advocate for people to build legislation and different things like that, the missing pieces, sometimes we can't physically remember them. Some people are still operating on life. They can't remember parts of their childhood. That could bring a little bit of that wholeness and understanding and it's a push and pull. So that's where it ties in and more so the advocacy sense and wanting to help people heal and move forward and fill in those holes, those missing pieces.

Andre explains the challenges he endured in getting his own files about his life from the court system. While it took some time, navigational and resistant capital were both used to uncover segments of his life. He brought a very thin manila folder as his artifact, a limited set of files that he could not even read entirely as he was unable to receive certain items due to needing judicial

signatures and or court approvals to try and make sense of his life through redacted documents. Andre endured years of pain and suffering at the hands of his family, community, foster care, and juvenile detention centers. Even at his current age, several barriers still exist and enact pain and suffering in other ways. Yet, those experiences and encounters influenced his academic major choice in the social sciences.

By the same token, Earl had a similar desire to help people like Roxanne, Jill, and Andre. Earl originally wanted to major in criminal justice said, “I wanted to chase criminals for the rest of my life”, but eventually decided to social work discipline. Earl offered:

I grew a love for what social workers do and the roles that they play in day-to-day life. I learned that a social worker is broader than just working at DSS. Once I learned that, hey, there's so many different roles from the micro mezzo to macro. You can be a policymaker social worker or you can be... It's so many things. So once I started learning all that, I said, "This is where I want to be. I want to be helping people. I want to be making changes on behalf of people. I want to be the voice for those that can't get in these seats."

Above, Earl explains how he came to find a “love for what social workers” did after enrolling in an HBCU that did not offer a criminal justice major. His desire to help people was manifested by his aspirational capital. He saw himself as a voice for the often-forgotten population (e.g., low-income, abandoned youth). Numerous participants from this study advocated that while in foster care, they did not have a voice; no one listened, and no one gave them a place to talk or voice their concerns, needs, or desires. While he had his own experiences with social workers, his understanding of the profession was limited. Most likely due to not having case workers or social workers like Kioni. Earl realized that he wanted to help people, motivating him to pursue majors across three different degree types. (i.e., bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree). As the other participants described their desire to help people (e.g., kids, young adults, students) in therapeutic, school, and legislative ways, Darius offered how he wanted to help people in areas of human resources and employment:

I have the skills and the natural ability to communicate with people and want to be help people and train people and all of those other skills. But there is what if I could also be involved with the hiring process as far as advising people, all of the materials required to apply for the position, or maybe coach them into how to present yourself for an interview?

For Darius, like Andre, had attended several institutions and tried his hand at a few majors, but had to unenroll due to financial challenges and caring for his family. Darius's quotation confirms and acknowledges his aspirational capital and sees himself in a role assisting people in employment opportunities. Utilizing his funds of knowledge from his past experiences he was able to make sense of his academic major and future career paths. As he explained in our interview, his life experiences (e.g., foster care, employment/careers) underlined his efforts to help others. He adds:

I always explain like I just want to be helpful and make that person's day better than how it started. And if I can be a conduit of that, then I would definitely want the Lord to use me in that regard. I feel like even with my customer service in my hotel experience, there's always been a little bit of using my own life experience in hopes that it'll be helpful to someone.

As a person who had worked across many different industries, he wanted to help others find their way through the hiring process. Finding a job can be very hard and can come with additional barriers at times. Earl, having experienced various forms of instability (e.g., foster care, financial barriers to education, and unemployment), draws on his navigational, resistant, and aspirational capital to further his education and hope to assist others in their pursuit of jobs or create more stability for themselves. He saw a major in social science as a means to contribute. Further Like Jill, Earl turned to a higher power to use him as a tool to help others.

As explained by the participants in this theme, those in a subset of social sciences majors chose their academic major based on their yearning to impact others' lives in various positive ways. Above, the participants' quotations give us glimpses into their stories by way of an

assortment of social capital. In other words, their experiences and their proclivity to help others through similar experiences shape how they came to terms with selecting their majors in the social sciences. Their choice of entering the social sciences field and the orientation to help others, may underscore the stability they hoped to create, for themselves and others walking similar paths as them.

“I Feel Like My Community Needs Help”: Inspiring to Help the Black Community Influences Academic Major Choice in Social Sciences

While there was an underlying appeal to serve others, some participants' social sciences academic major decision objectives prioritized assisting Black families and Black communities. Although there was a general want to aid people, there was a stronger desire to educate, uplift, and strengthen Black individuals and Black communities, as well as to spotlight the continued systematic prejudices that continue to plague Black and brown bodies. Chapman et al. (2020) extend that state and federal policies, as well as k-12 schools and school contexts, shape the college-going process of Black students. As identified in this theme, participants assert how whiteness in the context of the lack of resources and employment hires often harms and polices Black communities. These racialized experiences, including their experiences in the foster care system, significantly influenced the participants' pursuit of a particular subset of social science degrees. Participants were adamant that their choice of academic major was influenced by their ambitions to teach and help people and communities that look like them. For instance, Melissa, who was majoring in social, work expressed how her academic major decision was influenced by her desire to help the Black community:

I would say the chances that we have as Black people and growing up in the system [foster care], I feel like are very low. I do specifically want to go into Black communities when I graduate, and I want to work as an individual case manager or independent living case manager in Black communities. And they basically help that team be ready to become an adult. Like they help them with getting an apartment or like signing up for

different insurances and things like that. I feel like a lot of times, we don't have people like in the Black communities, our family members aren't teaching us that, or like we don't have a lot of knowledge about certain resources that other races have. I do feel like, I want to go and help as many of us as I can, because we are in the dark when it comes to a lot of things, like a lot of things.

Melissa notes above that the dominant narrative around Black youth who have experienced foster care is that their chances of success and or creating stability are low. Having first-hand experiences with the challenges (e.g., securing housing, employment, higher education access) of foster care youth to transition outside of foster care uplifts her navigation, resistance, and linguistic capital. Collectively, these other forms of capital activated her navigational capital. Her academic major choice was influenced by her degree's capacity to place her in positions that strengthen and advocate for Black communities. Contributing to the betterment of Black people's lives and possibilities was a significant consideration in her major decision. Furthermore, it appears that she seldomly saw or knew an individual who looked like her and was able to serve in those capacities. Melissa's quotation above calls attention to and recognizes the racist paradigms in existence that continue to prohibit Black people from obtaining an education and moving up in society at large (see Freeman, 1997; Owens, 2022). Her comprehension of the discriminatory dynamics that frequently affect Black people and the places in which they live motivates her to be a change agent.

Dana felt the same way as she describes her academic major choice and the role it plays in her aspirations to help those who look like her:

I feel like now in regard to my race, because I'm able to focus and see in a different lens, and my community, there's a lot of healing that needs to take place. I feel like there's so much that has been normalized in the Black community that often certain abusive tendencies or tendencies that are detrimental to children and their upbringing, it shows in these adults and they're struggling. A lot of them are fighting for their life in a mental way. I feel as if with me being a Black woman, it's important because I want that to be different for my community. I want my community to be a lot healthier. I want communication to be normalized amongst my community, but also freedom. With my religion, I believe that we're all as one, we're all God's children. In the Black community,

there's so many burdens, there's so many underlying understandings of... I know you probably hear a lot of times where people are saying what goes on in their house, stays in their house. That's something that's toxic in the Black community that I want to break. If there is something damaging or detrimental happening in a home, regardless of race, regardless of pride, whatever is felt, it needs to be addressed. It needs to stop because sometimes people don't know what they're doing. It's okay to ask for help, and I feel like my community needs help. Nobody's willing and knows how to ask for help, and it's because it hasn't always been given to Black people freely. Help has not always been given to Black people. They've always felt like they've had to fight.

Above, Dana identifies numerous constructs (e.g., health, communication, abuse, asking for help, Black tendencies, poor and lack of communication, discontent from a higher power) that historically and continue to harm the Black community. Moreover, she discerns that resources and support are not typically allocated to the Black community as to other groups. She elaborates that the Black experience often involves a constant struggle and an ongoing fight for survival. In addition, with so many historical tensions within the community, it is often hard to bear the weight. However, as a Black woman, she feels it is her responsibility to take on the burden of saving her community. Her vision for a more empowered community is at the intersection of her various capitals (i.e., aspirational, navigations, familial, social, resistant, linguistic), which she hopes to share with other Black folks and strengthen the capitals of the Black community as a whole. The impact she wants to make on the Black community guided her decision to enroll in a social science degree program.

The same was true for both Inga and Halle as well. Inga offers:

I chose psychology, and, I do feel like me being Black, maybe a woman, but especially Black, did start to influence that choice as well. Because I started saying and feeling as though I need more people that look like me, with these experiences, to be in these positions to help people who look like me, with these same experiences. We need more Black therapists. So yeah, I feel like not initially in choosing psychology did it, but then once I really was cemented and like, okay, yeah, no, I am going to go and choose psychology, it did. It just kind of further cemented that idea. I was like, yeah, as a Black woman.

And Halle shared:

So as a woman, I feel like it plays a role because for one, I feel like there's not a lot of Black women in a lot of these fields. I feel like nowadays, of course it's starting to be more diverse and stuff, but I feel like we always need more Black representation, especially for the Black individuals in therapy. I feel like, of course the therapist is a therapist, but from personal experience, my first therapist, she was African American and I had her for years. I currently have a Caucasian therapist and I adore her just the same. But I just feel like it's important for us to have people that look like us so we feel more comfortable because I feel like that's how I felt more comfortable to open up to her.

For Dana, Inga, and Halle, their identities as Black women and understating the help that is needed in the Black community heightened their sense of pursuing majors in the social sciences.

As Halle asserts, her aspirational capital, intertwined with her understanding of the resistant capital and the navigation capital guided her through the complex spaces of whiteness, higher education, and career pathways, inspiring her to persevere on her path to graduation. On par to Melissa's reply, Halle emphasizes that there is still a dearth of Black representation in the areas that are supposed to benefit communities the most. Their remarks reinforce the difficulties that Black people, particularly Black women, face in obtaining such professional opportunities. A point brought up several times by Brandy, an older participant who experienced years of racism and sexism as she made attempts to navigate the workforce. While Inga and Halle's identities were not always at the forefront of their decisions in the beginning, as they both changed their majors at one point during their college-going process and as they reflected more on their experiences and career desires, they became steadfast in their majors and the help they want to provide for individuals that look like them.

The aspirations to help the Black community were also true for Shawntae and Roxanne. For them, there was an increased desire to help Black children specifically. From these two, there was a prominence to help Black children see individuals that look like them in resourceful places. For instance, Shawntae shares:

I always loved the idea of changing, being the mentor to people who also have similar stories to mine and just being a person of color and educating other kids of color because I know that they don't see a lot of Black teachers. I never had one in the K through 12. I never had a Black teacher. I don't think it was until my freshman or sophomore year of college. I had a hula teacher who was an African American, but that was my first time having a person of color as a teacher. So it really pushed me into wanting to go into education. I want other kids to see that there's Black teachers out there and I don't think you really see that a lot nowadays. I feel like it's getting a little better, but when I was in school I never saw it.

As she attended a total of ten elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school, not having a Black teacher in her entire K-12 education heavily weighed on her as she describes above. Her passion for being a Black teacher to help and support Black children exhibits how her aspirational capital favored her academic major choice. Having attended several school systems as a child and never having a teacher who looked like her raises several concerns. The most pressing is the potential detrimental impact on Black children due to the absence of Black teachers in classrooms (D'amico et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021). This could significantly affect their educational experiences and their perceptions of race and learning in the classroom (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Milner & Howard, 2004). Beyond that, her other identities as a Black girl with a foster care background add to the complexities of her educational-going experiences. Her positionalities guided her academic major choice, and additionally, her career aspirations. Shawntae's major choice was influenced by her desire to be what she never saw growing up; a Black teacher who can help nurture and teach Black students. Just as Shawntae wanted to be in a position to help Black children, so did Roxanne. She elaborated on her decision to declare her major in psychology:

Just helping a lot of the Black kids in the system, I don't know. Just seeing how well... I don't want to say to toot my own horn and be like, "Oh, I came out so good." But to see how well with a little bit of support that I had, how well I came out, how that made me feel I want to be that resource for... I feel like it was really hard for me to trust people because all the people in my corner were White. I think it'd be a lot easier for people to open up and really fix their problems. Like the African American kids that are going

through these situations, I think it would be easier for them maybe to feel... I feel like a lot of... I don't know. They feel a little bit more comfortable. I want to be that voice for African American kids to know, actually speak their mind and speak their truth without feeling like they're going to be hurt at the end of the day.

For Roxanne, graduating with a social science degree would put her in a position to be a resource for other Black youth in the foster care system. As she explained, most of her support team was white, which sometimes created a trust issue or level of discomfort. Halle made an identical argument, noting that her current therapist is white, as opposed to the Black women she had previously worked with. This experience and desire to help young youth who look like her helped her choose a major that best resonates with her career aspirations, both guided by her aspirational capital. Added to that, as also implied by other participants, Roxanne's career aim to give Black children a voice influenced her academic major choice.

Faith had an identical passion to Roxanne and Shawntae, which was to help children be heard. While Faith was thinking about unenrolling in school due to some institutional concerns, she was also in the process of switching her major. She shared about her decision to transfer into psychology:

I feel like we could use a lot of Black workers in any field, in any industry. But if I do decide to stick out with this psychology, I said that I would want to either work with kids or be a therapist or something because I know how it feels to be unheard, especially as a Black youth. I say that would be the goal.

At the time of our interview, Faith was at the crossroads of major decisions pertaining to her education. Like other participants, Faith stresses the need to see more Black people in all careers. Trying to make sense of her choices, she relied on her navigation and aspirational capital to see herself overcoming obstacles and becoming a therapist. She saw herself as an individual who could provide Black kids with a safe and welcoming environment to talk. However, within the Black community, this could be contradictory for some generations, as there is a historical norm

of children being expected to be seen and not heard (Graham & Bruce, 2006). Such thinking could be problematic as children, especially Black children, are dealing with a lot living in these current times.

For the participants above, there is a manifestation of resistant, aspirational, and social capitals. Melissa, Dana, Halle, Inga, Shawntae, and Roxanne exhibited their fondness for Black communities to no longer be tied to oppressive inequalities; they all wanted to transform the perceptions of the communities they were from; therefore, ordaining what Yosso called resistant capital. In the same fashion, they all had visions of seeing Black communities and Black people experience better outcomes, a formation of their aspirational capitals. Furthermore, the absence of representation of Black women in these professions convinced them to consider how they could be what they were missing. Collectively, they thought that as Black women, they needed to take on these positions in order to uplift and, in some ways, save the Black community. Further, the Black women wanted to give Black children a voice. Lastly, as the quotations deliver, these participants' connection to their communities guided them to return with vision and intent to create change, a testament to their social capital.

Summary

The findings in this chapter reveal that several factors influenced the academic major choice decisions of Black college students with foster care backgrounds. As participants reported in the findings, early developed passions, early exposures, career aspirations, and the desire to help communities all impacted their academic major choices. Combined with these factors and their identities as Black college students, Black women, and Black foster care youth, the findings identify that academic major decisions are often made free of racialized considerations.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to further understand Black college students with foster care experiences and their college-going process. A total of 31 participants from across the country shared their experiences, encompassing their lives growing up (e.g., before and during foster care, their K-12 education), and the influential factors that shaped their decisions to pursue higher education, select an institution and select an academic major. The findings from this study, drawn from 60 one-on-one semi-structured interviews (all participants completed two interviews except Janet and Yolanda) with an unexamined college student population, are of significant importance. The findings from this study align with other research exploring college choice (Chapman et al., 2020; Freeman, 2005; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Johnson, 2019) and adds to the current scholarship examining the similar phenomenon of students with foster care histories (Gross et al., 2020), especially Black students with foster care backgrounds (Amechi et al., 2023; Lane, 2016; Smith et al., 2015). More specifically, the findings enhance our understanding of the influential factors the Black college students with foster care backgrounds consider when making decisions about their college-going process (i.e., deciding to pursue higher education, institutional and academic major choice).

Discussion of Key Findings

There is an intricate process of several smaller interdependent choices that lead to students' decisions to enroll in higher education. For the first research question, four significant findings were identified as contributing to: 1) spaces served as a space of safety; 2) participants expressed a love of learning, 3) considered various family factors; and, 4) viewed higher education as an opportunity to redefine their identity. For study participants, their decision to further their education was grounded in intrinsic and extrinsic influential factors and supported by their different forms of capital (e.g., navigation, aspirational, familial, resistant). Internal

motivations included a core understanding of race, high regard for learning, and the opportunity to redefine themselves. Some of these findings align with other scholars who have identified internal factors that influence college-going students' decisions to enroll in higher education (Chapman et al., 2020; Freeman, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Additionally, other participants identified how external motivators like the positive and negative opinions of immediate family (e.g., biological, adoptive) and extended family (e.g., lawyers, child advocates, teachers) members influenced their higher education decisions. In conversation with published literature, Black families and/or extended families continue to be highlighted as an important factor in Black students' decision to go to college (Amechi et al., 2020; Burt et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Chapman and colleagues' (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice highlights the significant role of family background and support systems in shaping students' higher education decisions. These findings contribute to the different ways intrinsic factors, extrinsic factors, and participants' various configurations of capital, play into the role of higher education in providing a sense of stability.

For generations, research has indicated that higher education degrees equate to an improved quality of life (e.g., employment, health benefits, increased earning potential, skills, and stability) (Perna, 2005). However, these outcomes are often not always true for those from marginalized communities (Espinosa et al., 2019). The pursuit of a college degree is an aspirational long-term goal; with the ability to create a sense of stability after completion of the degree (e.g., self, family) (Kumok & Hahn, 2023; Perna, 2005). This study offers that stability can be viewed on a scale, spectrum and/or a continuum and changes depending on one's identities and immediate needs. For instance, some of the participants in this study made college-going decisions based on their specific identities and unique needs at a pivotal point of their lives

as Black youth leaving the foster care system. As traditional college-going students may have alternative options after high school (e.g., staying home with parents, access to food, and employment opportunities), some students in foster care typically do not (Grooms, 2020; Skobba et al., 2023). Therefore, based on this study's findings and empirical research higher education pathways are uniquely positioned to offer stability via basic needs (Perna, 2005). Across their different identities, and using their various forms of capital (e.g., familial, navigational, aspirational, resistant), multiple participants in this study identified how higher education supplied their immediate needs (i.e., basic necessities) for housing, access to food, or employment opportunities. As all participants had long-term goals for their college-going experiences, these findings emphasize how basic necessities may influence Black college students with foster care backgrounds to pursue higher education.

Four significant findings played critical roles in influencing participants' institutional choice: 1) the amount of available funding; 2) proximity to support systems; 3) professional influences; 4) specific college support programs and a wide variety of academic majors, played a critical role in influencing their institutional choices. The data suggests the various degrees of support on,-and off-campus influenced these participants' decisions on which institution to attend. For instance, the cost of higher education and the financial support offered at specific institutions and institution types contributes to a student's decision to attend, for students with foster care backgrounds (Gross et al., 2020) and those without foster care backgrounds (Comeaux et al., 2020). Similarly, institutional location and proximity to immediate family, extended family, and friends, served as an important factor for student populations without foster care experiences (Chapman, 1981; Hilman, 2016) and student populations with foster care experiences (Johnson, 2021). Findings suggest having trusted support systems vouch for specific

higher education institutions influences participants' overall decisions (see similar outcomes in Chapman et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2015). For the participants in this study, factors such as adequate financial support, family, friends, teachers, and case workers were crucial in their decisions about which institution to attend. Taken together, this decision shapes how participant's experiences were mapped onto the four elements of Chapman et al., (2020) college choice model, in relation to their capitals and perceptions of institutions' potential to provide them with a sense of stability.

This chapter's findings also offer that stability may exist on a continuum for this student population (i.e., Black college students with foster care backgrounds). As some participants' decisions to go to higher education were based on immediate needs, their institutional choice adds to the complexities within the spectrum, in the setting of intermediate stability (e.g., a combination of short-term and long-term stability needs). With immediate needs secured by the decision to attend college, participants were able to shift their focus to other important needs, including safety, community, and a sense of belonging. Financial stability furthered their level of security, while proximity to their support system and college support programs contributed to a sense of community locally, and within the higher education space. These aspects all continued to fit along the continuum of stability, as they pursued their long-term goal of a college degree.

Like other college-going decisions, selecting an academic major is often multilayered and takes time (Lent & Brown, 1994; Montmarquette et al., 2002; Porter & Umback, 2006). The data from this study offers an assortment of influential factors students considered when selecting an academic major: 1) early passions; 2) family connections; 3) academic confidence; 4) early exposures; 5) career goals; and 6) the desire to positively impact their community. Although academic major choice scholarship is not new knowledge in the broad context of higher

education (Barrett et al., 2002; Forbes, 2022; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Thomas, 1985), these findings add to the literature in the context of major choice for Black students with foster care backgrounds. As of now, there is minimal scholarship exploring such a phenomenon. The data shows that for participants, alongside other factors (e.g., gender, race, decision to attend college, institutional choice), their experiences in foster care often assisted in directing their decisions on their academic major. For example, some participants' adverse upbringings influenced their major choices in fields where they could creatively cope with their experiences. For other participants, their connections with support systems inspired them to lean towards certain degrees over others. At the same time, some participants chose majors that would enable them to help prevent other Black families and children from going through similar traumatic experiences. This study expands on Chapman and colleagues' (2020) conceptual model by examining participants' institutional and academic major choices.

Selecting an academic major adds to the complexities of the spectrum of stability. Choosing an academic major is closely linked to career pathways, which in turn are connected to long-term aspirations. As the findings suggest, most of this study's participants had major choices aligned with their career goals. Based on the findings, different academic majors could lead to various levels of stability. Conversations with participants revealed that certain majors, on average, take longer to complete, and specific career pathways necessitate earning advanced degrees (e.g., graduate degrees, certifications) to achieve a certain level of financial stability. Career pathways like engineering or medicine, for example, frequently require extra degrees for professional security, but also often result in higher debt accumulation. As a result, the goal of stability remains aspirational, as individuals must continue to pursue various degrees of education in order to obtain financial and professional stability.

Although the findings chapters were presented individually for clarity and to answer the research questions that guided this study, the findings in this study reveal a connection across the three college-going decisions. That is, there remains an overlap in some factors that collectively influenced participants' college-going decisions. As the college-going process is often viewed as separate decisions, the findings of this study suggest that the decision to attend higher education, institutional choice, and major choice are often connected. As the participants expressed throughout the findings, some of their college-going processes were interrelated where others choices were independent. For example, some participants' college-going decisions were closely tied to their long-term career goals. They understood the necessity of higher education and chose institutions that aligned with their academic major choices and future career paths. Some participants approached their choices with a forward-thinking mindset, strategically aligning their educational journey with careers. For instance, some participants learned about their desired careers, knew that they had to go to college, and had to attend an institution with their particular academic major. Furthermore, individuals in those particular cases often chose institutions with more reputable programs and opportunities to move closer to their career pursuits

As seen in the examples mentioned above, there appears at times to be a connection between the three college-going decisions explored in this study. However, in other cases, these choices are made independently of one another and often in various configurations, as an infinite number of combinations could exist. There are other situations where two of the three choices are linked, and one of the decisions is the outlier. The college-going process is not always connected across all three choices, and is not always linear. A student can have the desire to want to go to college, and have a major in mind, but not have an exact institution. Or they can have the desire to attend college, have an institution they want to attend, but not have made a clear choice

around a major. Furthermore, financial aid often impacts these decisions as well. If an institution offers a stable financial package, even if the ideal major is not an option at that institution, they may have to weigh one choice against another. It is easier to change majors than change institutions. Additionally, the type of institution impacts the interconnectedness between the three choices in the college-going process. If a student had made the decision to attend college, and wanted to attend an HBCU, but their ideal major was not offered there, they may also opt to switch majors, because the type of institution carried more weight than the other choices in the college-going process.

Furthermore, college-going decisions can be isolated from one another and/or thought about in a non-linear process. For example, in certain college-going processes, the academic major choice may be a student's first choice or last choice. In such situations, the academic major choice may be delayed until the other two choices (i.e., a student who, without having chosen a major, decides to enroll in college and attend a particular university because their romantic partner either attends or lives nearby) are solidified. In this way, each choice within the college-going process can be distinct from the other decisions. Prime example, some participants in this study had not even thought about college as an option until their later years of high school. Then the idea of what institution to attend and an academic major were difficult choices. The findings suggest foster care system creates ongoing barriers and challenges that make it difficult for individuals to make cohesive decisions, as youth often lack the support and resources needed to navigate higher education, understand their institutional options, and explore the range of available academic majors.

Implications for Policy

The number of Black families and children who are in contact with the child welfare system continues to be historically alarming (Detlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2020). Nationwide, there

needs to be a greater emphasis on preventative programs to keep Black children out of the foster care system from the start. More programs such as opportunities of educational advancement, employment, self-care, and pipeline programs that create stability are needed specifically for Black individuals with foster care experiences to counter the continuous amplification of harmful pipelines (e.g., poor schooling, child welfare, prison). The participants who volunteered for this study came from various states, and although their stories had some overlap, there were also significant problematic differences, which they elaborated on during the interviews as they discussed the complexities of the foster care system across state boundaries. For some in this study that had lived in multiple foster homes, the constant moving across state lines became a challenge for them to find resources and support and to create stability. Currently, each state is in control of its own policies and regulations around foster care (Policy Circle, 2024). Without a country-wide understanding and a particular set of policies in place, children and families affected by the foster care system will continue to face barriers.

The rules and guidelines for foster care and education, including access to resources such as programs and funding, are not standardized. The child welfare system and the foster care system continue to cause havoc for Black families and their children, and without the creation of race-conscious policies in place, subsequent generations of families and their children will continue to be harmed. Most current policies are not culturally appropriate and fit for Black families and children, or in other words do not consider or take into the racialized experiences of Black people. Too many current laws and policies are race-neutral and fail to underscore the unique experiences Black youth with foster care backgrounds tend to face. Therefore, there needs to be a set standardization of educational and support practices across the country for this population. For example, implementing strategies to ensure that students in foster care do not

miss school and are placed in schools with the appropriate level of support needed for their success. In addition to creating and maintaining development programs aiming at increasing the high graduation rate, skill development, and college access, specifically for Black individuals with foster care experiences, would be ideal. States need to become more innovative and turn to non-deficit Black safe evidence-based approaches to assist with the educational advancement and obtainment of Black college-going individuals with foster care experiences. Expert academics, scholars, and policymakers with experience in race-related work can help implement these necessary changes.

Implications for Practice

While some may argue that the entire foster system needs to be abolished, I am at a crossroads, as I am in agreement that the current system is flawed and continues to be so, especially for those with marginalized identities. However, parts of the system need to be dissolved, while other parts could be revised or reconstructed. My evidence is derived from the combination of the participants' stories and my own work experiences in the system, both of which have offered glimpses into a variety of cases that would be transformed with possible reconstruction, or abolishment. I propose reconstruction rather than dismantling since some participants indicated that foster care offered them opportunities they might not have received elsewhere. As the system is helpful for some, it is not organically beneficial for others. And still, previous research and these findings show that the likelihood of youth returning to their biological families seldom occurs in this population. From this, Black youth are often left in limbo and placed in environments that are not usually supportive of their needs and identities. As I have worked in the system and seen both the positive and the negative aspects, I understand that state and federal funding and the professionals working within the out-of-placement locations can make a youth's experience horrendous or successful. The research presented here

has several implications for practice. For example, parents (both biological and adoptive), educational professionals (e.g., teachers, counselors, and faculty), social workers, group home coordinators, and staff, as well as professional support staff (including mentors, GALs, advocates, lawyers, and campus staff) could all gain valuable insights from these findings.

Foster care placements must be more strategic in offering educational outlets for students. As many participants discussed in their narratives, from a young age, they understood education was important. However, that love of learning and school was often not cultivated holistically across all areas of their lives. For example, scheduling times to work on school tasks, offering educational incentives, and, most importantly, making learning fun. Doing so may include but is not limited to classroom learning, field trips (e.g., science museums, zoo, institutional campus tours), and engaging in various activities to get students interested in learning.

As some states are starting to implement middle school and high school career exploration programs, the foster care system must follow suit in such practices. Creating opportunities to expose Black foster youth with foster care backgrounds to various disciplines and career pathways could establish an increased love of learning and assist with future college-going decisions. This implication of practice must be taken on by all individuals in the youth's lives, for instance, interdisciplinary treatment teams (e.g., social workers, therapists, out-of-placement home caretakers/workers, Department of Human Services (DHS) care workers, and educational staff). Out-of-home placements can be targeted in inviting college students, college recruiters, and faculty to speak with youth residing in their neighborhoods. Furthermore, Black professionals with and without foster care backgrounds should be asked to talk with youth and share their experiences. According to participants' recounts of their experiences living in foster care placements, this process does not occur organizationally. Such practices may assist Black

youth in foster care by allowing them to be seen and heard and create opportunities to reflect on their identities and aspirations. One example of this would be educational programming that is race positive in order to further strengthen the participants racial identity and socialization.

Other participants shared they had only learned college was a possibility later in their lives (e.g., high school), as they had never known anyone who was pursuing a college degree. Foster parents and out-of-home placements must begin implementing educational programming opportunities for youth in their care. For example, connecting youth to Black college-going students could help them visualize themselves on a college campus in the future (Brooms et al., 2018). Equally important is ensuring that Black youth with foster care backgrounds are connected to mentors who share their experiences, attend schools that are committed to meeting their specific needs, and have access to pre-college programs. As one participant shared, attending various campus events, such as athletic conferences, at a young age, was instrumental in shaping his perception of higher education. Beyond sports, youth can be exposed to campuses that celebrate and promote Black culture, such as Black History Month celebrations or Martin Luther King Day events or have culture centers and academic programs that focus on the experiences of Black people. It is also essential to offer implications for those in the K-12 sector. As mentioned by some participants, the school was a refuge for some and a place of horror for others. Some participants found school safe as they could escape their homes and be in a place with peers and teachers who offered them grace and support. While some participants recounted pleasant experiences, others spoke of being mistreated by teachers, school staff, and peers and frequently not feeling validated, recognized, or heard. Teachers and administrators must be diligent in engaging in positive, uplifting, and developmental conversations with students. Schools need to be mindful of who their students are, and how they can be supported

individually, as students have different needs. Many participants reported that they rarely saw themselves reflected in places such as schools or school environments. Schools should hire more Black administrators, teachers, and support workers to assist Black foster care youth in various classroom environments (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021; Lomotey, 2019). Further, professional development programming with a strength-based mindset could support the teachers, administrators, academic counselors, and school social workers who may not understand the needs of Black foster care youth. Professional development workshops around trauma-informed care, mental health, and racial justice in education may help K-12 better serve this often-under-supported student group. Developing stronger partnerships with local community partners, and country-wide welfare agencies would begin to assist in narrowing the current gap between the two systems. Higher education institutions can improve the college-going process for students with foster care backgrounds. A handful of participants knew about foster care support programs/departments on their specific campuses prior to enrollment, but a large portion of the participants did not know such programs existed until after they had already arrived, and others did not know such programs existed at all. Institutions of higher education could begin to offer more strategic marketing for such campus support programs. For instance, institutions could begin to establish relationships with programs specific to foster care youth. Presenting at various out-of-home placement sites, creating and sharing social media content, and creating safe spaces for youth to come and ask questions could begin to close the current knowledge gaps that exist. As drawn from participant's perspectives, while the programs have been great they are often understaffed. Institutions could provide more resources and support to such programs to erase some of the common challenges students with foster care identities face during their college-going processes. Fully staffing such a program could help the program to

grow and reach more Black youth with foster backgrounds, informing them that such programs exist. Furthermore, hiring more individuals could help students expand their support networks, especially if programs recruit staff that have similar experience or look like the students in the program, which could be beneficial for Black college-bound students with foster care backgrounds. Also, programs should provide opportunities and encourage current students and or alumni of the institutions to share their experiences about their time on campus with local high schools, foster care placements, and job corps programs.

Implications for Future Research

Additional inquiries are needed to further advance knowledge around Black individuals with foster care experiences to access and succeed in their higher education (i.e., deciding to pursue more schooling, selecting an institution, choosing a major and potential career path, and extracurricular experiences) ventures. This study begins to offer new questions to discover new possibilities for this population. Future research should aim to not only explore the obstacles but also the favorable outcomes of this underexplored population. Based on the findings from this study, more research needs to explore the college-going experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds across gender identities. As the participants in this study voiced, depending on their gendered identities they had to excel and go above and beyond to be seen as successful and/or capable. From participants' gendered perspectives, it was required that they take on extra burdens in regard to their journeys of being successful and prove that they can be greater than the societal stereotypes placed upon them.

Even though several months of strategic marketing and recruitment occurred to draw in participants for the study, mostly Black women responded to the call for this study. Out of the 31 participants in this study, 26 self-identified as women. However, this number is not surprising, as Black women often outnumber Black men in educational advancement (NCES, 2024). As the

Chapman et al. (2020) model helped understand Black students' experiences, it could not draw on the specifics of the racialized and gendered experiences of Black women. Although some scholars (Devost, 2022) have begun to do such work, more critical research is needed to better make sense of the experiences of Black women with foster care histories. Thus, scholars may wish to employ Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000; Devost, 2022), Strong Black Women (Abrams et al., 2014), and Letter-Writing Methodology (Angelou, 2008; Reavis et al., 2022) to extrapolate further the unique experiences of Black women who have been in various out-of-home placement types trying to make sense of their higher education experiences in par with their post-graduation aspirations.

In addition, further research may want to explore ways to uncover the realities of how Black men with foster care histories can be more vulnerable and open to talking about their experiences. The research could be insightful and powerful and offer new ways to improve foster care, K-12, and higher education systems. The four males in this study spoke about their experiences, but in different ways compared to the women participants. The men in this study voiced their educational experiences and challenges differently. For instance, being labeled the class clown, being placed in an alternative school, being placed in special education, or having internal and external conflicts with anger/behavioral concerns were discussed in the conversations with the male participants. A future research project to get at this may want to explore the intersections of Black masculinity, vulnerability, and trauma. Scholarships with such targeted research focus on their vulnerability and openness may uncover how Black males understand their position in the world and their connection or disconnect regarding their upward stability. Furthermore, many male participants reported that they had few, if any, positive male role models and that women played a more significant supporting role in their life. When

interviewing Black male participants with foster care backgrounds, future researchers should consider using a diverse panel of interviewers, including women. This strategy is crucial in reducing Black males' obstacles when talking to other Black men about their emotions, feelings, and vulnerability, underscoring the importance of understanding and addressing their unique Black male foster care experiences. The importance of this research cannot be overstated, as it may help to increase college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.

Beyond the research recommendations above, other scholars may want to explore the college-going experiences of Black college students with foster care histories longitudinally. Being that this study did not capture the experiences of participants at the beginning or in the college-going process, and many of the participants in this study discussed their current graduate school statuses, aspirations of graduate school (i.e., masters, PhD, other professional degrees), and career exploration or commitment, a longitudinal study would help offer new perceptions and awareness into the lives of this understudied population. Scholars interested in taking on such a study may want to follow Black high school juniors and seniors with foster care backgrounds through their college graduations. Furthermore, having the students capture their experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions), in journals, photos, or yearly artifacts would offer additional ways to analyze and make deeper connections to their educational pathways. A research project of such magnitude may give new insights to several additional possible inquiries (e.g., higher education preparation, college choice, institution choice, major choice, career choice, post-graduation choices). Studies like this would be beneficial as it would elevate what is currently known about the experiences of Black college-going students with foster care histories over time.

Findings from this study emphasized how many participants acknowledged in their counternarratives that their overall educational pursuits aligned with their religious beliefs. Across all the finding chapters, participants referenced their Christian identities and how their relationship with God aided their academic pursuits, including deciding to go to college, selecting an institution, choosing a major, and walking in faith toward a specific career path. Scholars should investigate the connection Black students with foster care histories have with religion and spirituality and how it serves as a motivating and/or protective factor for them and their educational advancements. One could inquire about participants' overall relationship with God, their interactions with preachers/pastors, their connection with other church members, the influence of specific Bible stories/gospel songs, and participants' own testimonies in relation to their college-going goals. Further exploration of religion and spirituality at the nexus of Black college students with foster care histories can provide new insight into higher education aspirations and persistence in a highly understudied population.

Other areas of possible research lie in understanding the experiences of Black college students with experiences across different placement types and different states. For example, some participants in this study spent time in Black foster homes where, as others, they grew up in predominantly white spaces. In addition to having been placed in foster care more than once, in different states, and having experiences across residential group homes, kinship care stays, and independent living programming. To investigate the varied and complex experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds and varied out-of-home placement stays, a researcher or research team may wish to carry out a qualitative phenomenological national-scope study employing individual and focus group interviews. Such a study would assist stakeholders in understanding the nuanced experiences of this student group, both individually

and collectively. Additional research may provide some perspective into whether and how students from these various placement types and states travel along the college-going excursion. A deeper comprehension of these experiences can reveal fresh strategies required to support and ready students from these backgrounds to succeed in continuing their education if they inquire or choose to do so.

Future research may want to continue to explore the academic major choice of Black college students with foster care experiences further. As this study covered some majors, not all disciplines and academic majors were captured. Expanding such research will help further understand the influences of major choice for this student population. Moreover, understanding a more comprehensive range of influential factors around major choice may help develop new insights into reasons students pursue specific (e.g., STEM, business, fashion design), and/or perceptions of choosing academic disciplines over others. To add, exploring how participants come to understand and pair major choice and stability aspirations related to specific career outcomes and/or quality of life improvements would further expand our knowledge base. In addition, such research may expand the scope of what is known about decisions to attend higher education, institutional choice, and major choice as this study's findings have shown such decisions are not always in isolation of each other.

Research shows that a significant number of college students change or transfer degrees before graduating (NCES, 2017). Several participants in this study changed their majors at some point during their academic journeys. Further research into the experiences of Black college students with foster care backgrounds who change their major could lead to the development of new strategies and interventions. For example, a scholar may want to examine the academic major change of 10 – 20 Black college students with foster care backgrounds. Expanding the

scope of major changes could offer opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of this specific student population's experiences in specific disciplines. This type of research study may provide new insights into students' departmental experiences, peer-to-peer interactions, faculty engagement, and/or changes in career/employment aspirations for Black college students with foster care backgrounds.

Finally, as a majority of the participants in this study identified as being from large city areas, others talked about being from more rural communities. Future research may want to examine the post-high school graduation process of Black foster care youth from rural communities. Utilizing such models as Jenk's (2023) Rural Post-Graduation Plan Development may help better understand the nuanced experiences of this specific student population. This model varies from other models as they primarily focus on students from urban and suburban areas. Furthermore, the approach emphasizes community-specific possibilities and allows for more expansive definitions of success beyond college attendance (e.g., industry/farm jobs, military, starting family, mission/volunteer work, trade schools that do not offer degrees).

Implications For Theory

This study applied Chapman and colleagues' (2020) conceptual model of African American college choice to identify the factors influencing Black college students (i.e., 26 women, 4 men, 1 nonbinary) with foster care backgrounds in their pursuit of higher education, institutional selection, and academic major choices. This conceptual model not only emphasized "choice" but also considered how cultural and racial factors influence student decisions. This model helped inform my work by further interrogating the racial tensions that have been historically perpetuated on Black and brown bodies in the child welfare system and higher education. The Chapman et al., (2020) conceptual model worked well, as other college-choice frameworks (e.g. Hossler & Gallagher, 1989; Perna, 2006) do not consider race as an influencing

factor in the decision-making process. While the African American college choice model was originally designed to explore institutional choice alone, this study extended its use to better understand participants' decisions regarding their academic majors. As the findings indicated, in some cases the college-going choice process is not done in alienation of one another.

Furthermore, the incorporation of CRT and Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth within the Chapman et al., (2020) conceptual college choice model helped illuminate the participants' skills and knowledge through their counter-narratives, making it an ideal analysis methodology for this research. Other empirical research has employed CRT and Yosso (2005) to make sense of Black college students with foster care histories experiences (Amechi, 2017; Amechi et al., 2023; Whitman 2021). Just as there was overlap in the college-going decisions, there was often overlap in the community cultural wealth that helped raise the influencing factors of this study's participants. Therefore, making it easier to draw connections between the participants college-going decisions and funds of knowledge.

Hodder's (1994) artifact analysis helped make deeper ties and connections to participants' college-going phenomenon. Although some participants did not bring artifacts to discuss, others brought multiple artifacts, each with its own unique story, allowing for the discovery of numerous narratives. Participants brought a variety of artifacts that assisted in making sense of their college-going experiences. The artifacts evoked memories of specific moments in time, allowing them to further elaborate on their influential factors in the college-going process. In addition, the artifacts sometimes drew out some participants' emotions as some smiled, some laughed, and others cried. The artifacts reflected the essence of the participants' identity and revealed their histories, values, connections, and aspirations. Future scholars utilizing artifacts should be mindful of the population being examined. For example, foster care

youth may not often have many items to consider when completing such an exercise. Some participants in this study discussed going off to college with very limited supplies and necessities. Although the artifacts added rich conversations and unveiled new insights from participants' experiences, they could also invoke thoughts about social class and the items people from marginalized communities have and do not have access to. Those who choose such a method may want to explore participants' experiences outside of materialistic items or objects.

The results of this study allude to the need for additional theory that demonstrates the relationship between the three stages of the college-going process: deciding to pursue postsecondary education, selecting an academic major, and choosing an institution. The results of this study show that although the phases are frequently understood as distinct, they are frequently interrelated. Since higher education is evolving, new theories that explain the factors that influence Black students' decisions to transfer to higher education settings are needed. This is especially true given the current climate, where affirmative action and race-based policies are being annulled from many higher education institutions and places of employment (Ellis, 2024; Sherman, 2023). New theorizing may help understand contemporary influential factors and growing challenges and barriers in the higher education experiences of Black college-going students. Further, from the emerging research, stakeholders can utilize future scholarship to improve the practices and educational outcome experiences of Black students (e.g., K-12, college).

While the Chapman and colleagues model was somewhat effective for this student population overall, it failed to address the complexities of the college-going experiences for Black students with foster care backgrounds. For instance, study participants lived in diverse families (e.g., biological, adoptive white, and Black home situations) and environments,

highlighting the multilayered nature of their journeys. A more detailed and comprehensive theoretical framework or conceptual model is urgently needed to capture the intricate nuances of these college-going students' experiences. Additionally, the existing framework did not adequately address the intersectional identities of Black youth within the foster care system. There is a critical need for a framework that emphasizes the experiences of individuals who have navigated foster care, particularly at the intersection of race, gender, and out-of-home placement types. Furthermore, although all participants identified as Black, they each engaged with their Blackness in unique ways—independently, socially, and historically.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the college-going process of Black students with foster care backgrounds. At large, this study has expanded the current understanding and scope of the college-going process, particularly for Black individuals with foster care histories. Specifically, the study set out to uncover the factors influencing participants' decision to pursue higher education, select an institution to attend, and determine the reasons behind their academic major choice. This study did just that, using the counter-narratives of 31 brave individuals who opened their hearts and minds to share their stories of iron will and perseverance. In doing so, the current literature on the educational pursuits of Black college students with foster care experiences has been extended and opened up the possibilities for further exploration. The foster care system was built for white children and to save white families. The racist and sexist ideologies that oversee higher education and foster care continue to neglect Black bodies. Preventing and denying Black children the resources needed to be academically successful are unpaved roads to traditional hardships in the Black community. To the Black youth who have felt voiceless and unseen, know that I hear you and see you.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire Form

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

Contact Number: _____

General Demographic Information

Current Age: _____ Gender Identity: _____ Pronouns: _____

Race/Ethnicity Identity: _____

School Information

Number of schools attended:

Elementary school: _____ Middle school: _____ High school: _____ College/University: _____

High School GPA: _____ SAT Score: _____ ACT Score: _____

Higher Education Institution(s): _____

Current Class Rank (Student Classification): _____

Academic Major(s): _____

GPA: _____

What year did you start your program: _____

Anticipated Graduation (or Year Graduated): _____

Membership in any clubs/on campus programs, organizations (e.g., Black Student Union, Greek Life, Religious Group, etc.):

How are you paying for your education? _____

Are you receiving financial aid (if so what kind): _____

Are you currently employed (if so where & how many hours a week):

Career/Profession Goals _____

Foster Care Demographic Information

What age did you enter foster care? _____

Were you ever adopted? If yes, at what age?

If not, what age did you emancipate (age out)?

Number of years in foster care: _____

Number of placements: _____

Number of social workers: _____

Gender(s): _____

Race(s): _____

Type of placement(s):

Foster Care Family _____ Kinship (biological family member) _____ Therapeutic Treatment Care _____

Residential/Group Home _____ Emergency Care _____ Other _____

Have you been homeless after foster care? _____

Family Background Information

Did you keep in touch with your biological family while you were in foster care? _____

Are you in touch with your biological family now? _____

Do you have siblings? _____ How many: _____ Did they experience foster care: _____

Do you have any children? _____ How many: _____

Appendix B: Interview One Protocol

Prior to interview state:

Reminder you can skip questions or stop this interview at anytime

Any names you use will be removed and given different identifiers (e.g., teacher, social worker, coach)

RQ1: What are the factors that Black college students formerly in foster care consider and how do those factors influence their selection of a higher education institution? **Foster Care Experiences:** I would first like to start by learning a bit more about your background

1. To start off.....can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
 - a. Could you please tell me about your childhood experiences and how you grew up?
 - b. Foster care experience?
2. Can you tell me some stories (interactions) with other individuals during your time in foster care? For example, can you share with me some favorite moments? worst moments?
 - a. Bio family?
 - b. K-12 teachers, counselors?
 - c. Social worker?
 - d. Community members (coaches, pastors, etc.).
 - e. Peers?
 - f. Others?
 - g. Do you have any favorite memories?
3. In terms of race....how did you navigate as a Black individual in foster care?
 4. If at all, can you share with me any memories or stories you may have about experiencing or witnessing racism within your time in foster care.
5. If at all, what type of services were offered to you as a youth in the foster care system? What services or resources did you want, or feel were missing, while you were in the foster care system?
 - a. What were some of the most helpful services or supports during that time?
 - b. Do you think your race played a role in your placement in the foster care system? How about in the services you did or did not receive?
 - c. Do you feel racism has played any role in your foster care experiences?
6. Tell me about your experiences in comparison to those who had identities not similar to yours.
 - i. (Probe follow ups: Gender? Race? Diagnoses/Abilities/Disabilities? Knowing bio family? Age?)
7. In what capacity did you see others that looked like you? (Black – peers, child welfare staff, group home staff)
8. In what ways did your time in the foster care system teach you lessons or offer you any knowledge about how to navigate life?

College Choice

9. To start off....how and when did you first learn about college?
 - a. When you were younger? More recently?
 - b. School counselors? foster care staff? TV? Movies? Social media?
10. How and Why did you decide to go to college?
 - a. If at all, did any of your identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, SES, foster care) influence you decision to pursue college?

- i. Race?
 - b. What or whom motivated you? Did any of the people you mentioned early affect your college choice process?
 - i. Bio family?
 - ii. K-12 teachers, counselors?
 - iii. Social worker?
 - iv. Community members (coaches, pastors, etc).
 - v. Peers?
 - vi. Others?
11. How did you gather information on the institutions you were interested in? (possible digital divide linkage)
- a. Marketing?
 - b. Location?
 - c. Institutional characteristics?
12. Can you tell me what it was like applying to college?
- a. Why did you select your specific institution?
 - i. (Aid? location?, support?, major?)
 - b. How did you feel when you received your acceptance notification?
 - c. How/When did you learn about financial aid? What was that process like for you?
 - d. If you attended new student orientation, can you tell me what that experience was like for you?
13. What was it about your current institution that let you know that was the place for you?
14. What were your expectations about college in general?
- a. How about at your institution?
15. How would you describe yourself as a college student?
16. Can you share how being a college student with a foster care background if at all impacted your college experience? Being Black? Etc.?
17. If any, what barriers and challenges did you face applying to college?
- a. If any, what barriers and challenges do you currently face in college?
 - i. Do you believe these barriers and challenges exist because of any of your identities?
 - ii. Can you explain what/who has supported you to stay in college?
 - 1. People (Faculty/Administrators/Staff)? Clubs? Organizations?
 - iii. If at all, how has the school aided you in staying enrolled?
18. What has been the most rewarding part of your college experience overall so far?
19. What are your overall educational goals?
20. What is your career goal or aspiration?
21. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences?

I appreciate you being open with me and sharing your stories. As previously discussed, there are two interviews; this is just one of them. The next interview will focus on your college choice and academic major decision. For our next interview, I would like you to bring an artifact that represents your college choice and/or academic major choice. An artifact can be anything that represents your college-going experiences. For example, artifacts can be but not limited to any object, a song, a picture/photograph, newspaper clipping, journal entry/letter, social media post or something else. I'm going to ask you some questions about your college choice, academic major choice, and your professional career trajectory. I understand that this process may take some time for you to reflect on; I will give you reminders and check in with you on your progress.

Appendix C: Interview Two Protocol

Prior to interview state:

Reminder you can skip questions or stop this interview at anytime.

Any names you use will be removed and given different identifiers (e.g., social worker, coach)

RG2: What are the factors that Black college students formerly in foster care consider and how do those factors influence their selection of an academic major choice?

Artifact Question

In our last interview, I asked that you bring an artifact for today's decision. An object that represents, evokes, and or sparks memories for you about your college-going process.

1. Can you please share with me what your artifact is and describe it for me?
 - a. Where did you get it from?
 - b. When did it come into your possession?
 - c. Do you use this artifact in any particular way?
2. In what way did this artifact assist in your college-going process? Is there a memory you can share connected to this artifact?
3. How and why did you land on bringing this artifact for discussion in comparison to other things you may have been thinking of?

Major Selection

4. What is your major and why did you choose it?
 - a. If undecided* That is okay, some people do not choose a major until later on, I changed my major several times while in school, in that case can you tell me about majors that you considering and why?
 - b. In what ways if at all did your different identities shape your major choice?
 - i. Race?
 - ii. Gender?
 - iii. Former foster care youth?
 - iv. If at all, how have various forms of discrimination influenced your major choice? (racism, sexism, ableism, etc.)
 - c. What were/are your academic goals that affected your major choice?
 - d. What were/are your career goals?
 - a. What personal values and attributes contributed to you choosing your major? (Why is this major and degree important to you?)
 - b. Have you ever thought about changing your major? Why?
5. What was your first exposure, experience or encounter with _insert major__?
 - a. How did that develop into an interest /passion?
 - b. Tell me how (insert their academic major) influenced your college trajectory?
6. What has your experience been like in the major? Maybe share some stories about:
 - a. Classes?
 - b. Peers?
 - c. Faculty?
 - d. How is the overall environment/atmosphere in your department?
 - e. During COVID?
7. What are some of the difficulties and or challenges of pursuing a degree in _insert major__?

8. What are some of the rewards/benefits of pursuing a degree in _insert major__?
9. What are some skills you have learned in (insert major) that are essential for your career pathway?
10. What currently motivates you to finish?
 - a. If at all, what is your current institution offering to help you finish?
11. What activities or communities have you partaken in/been a part of to help prepare you for your career?
12. Where do you see yourself in the future?
 - a. 5 years
 - b. 10 years
 - c. 15 years
13. What benefits or drawbacks do you envision possibly encountering?
14. Do you have any advice or suggestions for other Black students like yourself, former foster care youth?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences?

Appendix D: Additional Participant Demographics

Current Student Academic Status						
1 st years	2 nd years	3 rd years	4 th + years	Graduate	Graduated	Unfinished/ On Break
Faith	Dana	Eve	Lisa	Earl	Alvin	Andre
Kimberly	Lola	Gabriella	Melissa	Jill	Brandy	Lauryn
Rashia	Marlanna	Halle	Robin	Janet	Erykah	Yolanda
Roxanne	Sandra	Kioni		Toni	Inga	
Teyana		Darius			Shawntae	
		Zakia			Trina	

Number of Elementary-High Schools Attended				
1-5	6-10	11-15	12-16	17-40
Erykah	Brandy	Dana	Robin	Andre
Faith	Darius	Eve		Rashia
Gabriella	Earl	Lauryn		Sandra
Inga	Halle	Shawntae		
Janet	Jill	Trina		
Yolanda	Kimberly			
	Kioni			
	Lisa			
	Lola			
	Marlanna			
	Melissa			
	Roxanne			
	Teyana			
	Toni			
	Zakia			

Number of Elementary Schools Attended		
1-3	4-7	7-10
Earl (3)	Brandy (5)	Andre (10+)
Erykah (1)	Dana (5)	Shawntae (10)
Eve (5+)	Darius (6)	
Faith (1)	Eve (5+)	
Gabriella (3)	Kimberly (5)	
Halle (3)	Lauryn (5)	
Inge (1)	Lola (5)	
Janet (1)	Rashia (5)	
Jill (3-5)	Robin (7)	
Kioni (1)	Sandra (4)	
Lisa (3)	Teyana (6)	
Marlanna (2)	Trina (7)	
Melissa (3)		
Roxanne (1)		
Toni (3)		
Yolanda (2)		
Zakia (3)		

Number of Middle Schools Attended		
1-3	4-7	7-10
Alvin (2)	Lauryn (5)	Andre (10+)
Brandy (1)	Sandra (5)	
Dana (2)		
Darius (1)		
Earl (3)		
Erykah (2)		
Eve (3+)		
Faith (1)		
Halle (2)		
Inge (1)		
Janet (1)		
Jill (2)		
Kimberly (2)		
Kioni (1)		
Lisa (2)		
Lola (1)		
Marlanna (2)		
Melissa (1)		
Rashia (3)		
Roxanne (3)		
Shawntae (3)		
Teyana (1)		
Toni (3)		
Trina (2)		
Yolanda (1)		
Zakia (2)		

Number of High Schools Attended			
1-5	6-10	11-15	16-21
Alvin (3)	Kioni (7)	Rashia (12)	Andre (21)
Brandy (1)	Robin (6)	Sandra (12)	
Dana (4)	Roxanne (6)		
Darius (1)			
Earl (4 + Job Corp)			
Erykah (1)			
Eve (3+)			
Faith (3)			
Halle (1)			
Inge (1)			
Janet (2)			
Jill (1)			
Kimberly (2)			
Lauryn (1)			
Lisa (2)			
Lola (1)			
Marlanna (3)			
Melissa (2)			
Shawntae (1)			
Teyana (1)			
Toni (3)			
Trina (3)			
Zakia (2)			

Number of Higher Education Institutions Attending/Attended			
1 Institution	2 Institutions	3 Institutions	4 Institutions
Dana	Brandy	Alvin	Rashia
Eve	Erykah	Andre	Robin
Faith	Inga	Darius	
Gabriella	Janet	Earl	
Halle	Jill	Teyana	
Kimberly	Laurnyn	Toni	
Kioni	Lisa	Yolanda	
Lola	Zakia		
Marlanna			
Melissa			
Roxanne			
Sandra			
Shawntae			
Trina			

Additional Participant Information						
Parents	Military	HBCU	Adopted	Black Household	White Household	Experienced Homelessness
Alvin	Brandy	Brandy	Eve	Brandy	Eve	Andre
Brandy	Janet	Earl	Lola	Darius	Halle	Brandy
Darius	Jill	Trina	Janet	Earl	Kimberly	Erykah
Jill			Kimberly	Erykah	Kioni	Eve
Kioni			Melissa	Jill	Lola	Halle
Yolanda				Kioni	Rashia	Jill
				Melissa	Robin	Kimberly
				Toni	Roxanne	Laurnyn
				Trina		Melissa
						Robin
						Roxanne
						Sandra
						Shawntae
						Teyana
						Toni

Kinship	Campus Foster Care Support Program
Alvin (w/sister)	Alvin
Andre (w/sister)	Dana
Dana (w/aunts)	Eve
Darius (w/grandmother)	Faith
Earl (w/aunt/uncle/grandmother)	Gabriella
Erykah (w/aunt)	Halle
Gabriella (w/grandmother)	Kimberly
Halle (w/grandmother)	Kioni
Jill (w/grandmother)	Lola
Kioni (w/grandmother/aunt)	Marlanna
Lola (w/aunt)	Melissa
Marlanna (w/brother)	Roxanne
Robin (w/aunt)	Sandra
Roxanne (w/aunt)	Shawntae
Shawntae (w/aunt & uncle)	Teyana
Teyana (w/grandparents)	
Trina (w/grandmother)	
Yolanda (w/aunt & different family members)	
Zakia (w/brother & sister)	