

FROM FOSTER CARE TO UNIVERSITY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ACADEMIC
CHALLENGES

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my father, Travis Jacob Lord. Thank you for giving me the wisdom and strength to do what I love. I also want to dedicate this work to my siblings, Ashen Nathaniel Lord, Jacob Daniel Lord, and Melinda Charlotte Lord. We went through so much together and you all are the reason I continue to move forward.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
SEFC	Student who has experienced foster care
YEFC	Youth who has experienced foster care
CPS	Child Protective Services
SIL	Supervised Independent Living program
PMC	Permanent Managing Conservatorship
ETV	Education and Training Voucher
FCA	Foster Care Alumni
PAL	Preparation for Adult Living program
GPA	Grade Point Average

ABSTRACT

Students who experience foster care (SEFC) face unique challenges when they attend college, and little is known about their struggles in higher education. Childhood trauma, economic instability, and lack of support from family can make it difficult for SEFC to imagine any future for themselves, let alone pursuit of a college degree. To date, research on SEFC and academic achievement in higher education is quantitative, highlighting their low academic performance as compared with the general college student population. Drawing on in-depth interviews with SEFC, I explore how they experience and navigate mental health and academic challenges during college. I aim to fill the gaps in quantitative research by showing the nuanced experiences of SEFC while addressing the specific barriers and facilitators SEFC experience while attending Texas State University.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is an absence of knowledge about the struggles students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) face when aging out of an institution or foster home and attending a university. A 2012 study found that nearly four in ten foster youth have lived in more than three different placement settings, are residing in group homes, shelters or institutions and 38% have the goal of “emancipation” or “long term foster care” (Pecora 2012: 1121). Over four in ten youth (44%) in foster care have lived in more than three placement settings. Approximately 30,000 SEFC emancipate out of the foster care system each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2010), many of them wanting to achieve a sense of permanency in their lives (McCoy et. al, 2008). When SEFC are emancipated out of the foster care system, they are often not equipped with family support or skills to be successful academically (Avant, 2021; Dworsky & Perez, 2011; Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013, Morton, 2018; Fowler, 2017). Consequently, only “3 to 11% of SEFC earn a bachelor’s degree compared to the 33% of non-SEFC peers” (Avant, 2021: 1). From the childhood trauma, economic instability, and lack of support from family, it is a difficult task for SEFC to imagine any future for themselves, let alone the opportunity to attend a university (Avant, 2021; Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013; Bruskas, 2008; Fowler, 2017; Morton, 2018).

A survey of enrollment statistics done at Michigan State University shows that compared to first generation and low income students, SEFC were “significantly more likely to drop out before the end of their first year (21% vs 13%) and prior to degree completion (34% vs 18%)” (Day et. Al, 2011: 2038). Nationally, SEFC were less than

half as likely to obtain a degree in six years compared to low income and first-generation students (12% vs. 28%) (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Many SEFC struggle with their grades, leading to high dropout rates, despite the economic and social benefits of a higher education (Salazar, 2013; Tobolowsky, 2019; Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). The current literature indicates grades are lower for SEFC compared to the general population of undergraduates at Texas State University, but does not address why (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013).

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of many SEFC attending universities. Due to concerns for the safety of faculty, students and staff on campus, many classes transitioned to remote learning models at the beginning of the pandemic. Despite efforts on the part of professors to maintain a quality learning experience, this change has undoubtedly caused many difficult transitions for students (Liu, 2020). Liu conducted research surveying 2,000 students from universities across the nation, where she found an increase in mental health issues and concerns of failing grades. The pandemic has affected marginalized communities, “racial/ethnic minorities, students from low-income families, sexual minorities, and first-generation college students” even more (Liu, 2020). Low test grades and mental health barriers coupled with the impact of a pandemic highlights the need to understand the adequacy of resources available to SEFC. SEFC often struggle to get their basic needs met, and Covid-19 exacerbated housing and food insecurity for this vulnerable population (Amechi, 2020).

All of the extant research on SEFC and academic achievement in higher education is quantitative, highlighting their low academic performance as compared with the general college student population. An important question that remains unanswered is

why their grades are consistently lower (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). My research responds to a need identified by Dr. Toni Watt, one of the co-founders of Foster care Alumni Creating Educational Success (FACES) at Texas State University.

I incorporated ethnographic methods to gain an emic understanding of why SEFC grades are lower than that of the general population. My research aims to understand why SEFC are struggling academically and contextualize their experiences in higher education through their own voices.

The main questions addressed in this study are: 1. What experiences did SEFC have while navigating admissions? 2. What facilitators and barriers do SEFC experience in higher education? 3. What services are available to SEFC and to what extent do they utilize these services? 4. Are there supports and services that are not currently available to SEFC that they feel they need to successfully complete their degree?

During the Summer and Fall semester of 2021, I conducted a qualitative study at Texas State University to understand the experiences of SEFC as they navigated higher education. I interviewed nine students to elicit narratives about their journey in navigating processes (admissions, registering for classes, etc.), academic expectations (time management, study habits, office hours, etc.), and managing the mental health aspects of college life. Taking an ethnographic approach that centers the voices of youth, sharing their narratives in context of their life stage, backgrounds, and college environment, my thesis provides much needed insight into why SEFC continue to struggle academically.

Further, my research will inform FACES (Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success) faculty at Texas State University on how they can better serve the

needs of FACES students and refine their campus support programming accordingly. SEFC who are emancipated out of the foster care system are especially at-risk, and I address the nuanced background SEFC had in the foster care system, including how many different placements they lived in, and whether or not they were emancipated out of an institution or group home.

What does the term SEFC mean?

There is much debate on what the term foster care alumni (FCA) or SEFC means in the literature. FACES recruitment utilizes Student Business Services to track SEFC who have used a tuition and fee waiver for SEFC when enrolling at Texas State University (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). However, FACES welcomes all SEFC to utilize their services and join the FACES campus support program, despite the length of time they spent in the foster care system, or if they utilized a tuition and fee waiver (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Other campus support programs across different universities use various methods for identifying SEFC, including having students apply, self-identify and working with high schools in the local community to give youth who have experienced foster care (YEFC) campus tours of colleges (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Foster youth join FACES and other campus support programs in various ways, such as being referred, joining themselves, or automatic enrollment through eligibility for a tuition and fee waiver. Some SEFC who join may already be doing exceptionally well in college (Okpych, 2020). I mention this because students may never end up being referred to support services like FACES and thus may not be captured. I address the various backgrounds SEFC have had in the foster care system when conducting interviews to understand the nuanced reasons for varying levels of academic support.

My Ties to the SEFC Community

As a SEFC myself, I struggled with many hurdles on my journey through higher education. I graduated high school from an institution called Hill Country Youth Ranch at the age of 17. Depression, imposter syndrome, and absence of knowledge about resources while attending Texas State University were just a few of the challenges that I faced. However, one skill that I developed during this experience was resilience. While independence is one of the major factors that allowed me to be successful in my path towards a higher education, it was also a major inhibitor. I often would have panic attacks while working as a tutor or discussing uncomfortable topics in class that would lead to me crying uncontrollably. I dropped out of the class titled College Writing 1310 (ENG 1310) during my first semester because I was so embarrassed from crying in class. I was aware of some resources on campus, but simply thinking about reaching out for help made me feel inadequate and insecure. I was trying to prove to myself that I had the capability to do everything with no help. As this thesis will discuss, these are common experiences among SEFC.

Never having a stable home or safety net before or during college motivated me to get my degree. As a college student, I found stability and balance in my life that I never thought was possible. In addition to that, I knew I was not alone. I was a member of FACES (Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success), a program at Texas State University that connected me to other SEFC and invaluable resources and support. By reaching out to FACES and realizing that there was support for SEFC, I felt validated and seen in my experiences, allowing me to feel a sense of community. Having the ability to go to college provided me with a vision for myself and my future that I was never able to conceive of prior.

I, like countless other former and current foster care youth, learned that to have trust and the ability to depend on others is often a very difficult task. Trust in others can only come from trusting oneself and having the faith to know you are capable enough to succeed. Nobody becomes successful by themselves, and despite independence benefiting me in terms of motivation, I learned that I needed to start reaching out to professors and others to help me succeed in college. I felt driven to go to college for the financial safety net and was able to learn how to trust myself through the experience of higher education. For most students, college is perceived as a financial risk and difficulty. For SEFC, it is one of the only options they have security wise as they exit high school. While my experiences as a SEFC had much in common with the students I interviewed, my experience is one among many possibilities students who have experienced foster care face. Feminist Science and Technology scholar Donna Haraway's situated knowledge offers a lens in which I can expand on how I situate my experience in this work. Haraway argues that we need an alternative to absolute objectivity and radical subjectivity, that allows us to make space for knowledge that is embodied, partial, and situated. When we see knowledge as partial, we make space that build communities rather than isolated unmarked and marked individuals (Haraway 1988). My experiences are my own situated knowledge claims about SEFC. However, my larger ethnographic work aims to build on a collection of SEFC situated knowledge that examines common experiences while also attending to the fact that their knowledge is always a "view from a body always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway 1988, 589).

My ethnographic approach will highlight SEFC experiences within the context of

their relationship with the foster care system. No SEFC have the same experience, and there are varying factors, such as cultural context, ethnic identity, academic preparedness, and linguistic competence that contribute to SEFC's ability to succeed in higher education. I emphasize the importance of understanding SEFC's experience in their own voices and intend to encapsulate their stories of academic trials and tribulations in my research. Some critics claim ethnographers are "self-indulged narcissists" and that autoethnography perpetuates a "romantic construction of the self" (Coffey, 1999: 132; Atkinson, 1997). However, others have argued that including personal narratives creates a strong bond between the writer and their research subjects (Goodall, 2000), giving the researcher a chance to be vulnerable, self-reflexive, self-aware, self-respectful, and an authentic scholar (Winkler, 2018). Further, Donna Haraway's work on situated knowledge also offers a lens for understanding this work with her concept called Location. Haraway explains that location is about vulnerability and advocates that we see the world from the location of our bodies. By doing this, we can embrace partial knowledge not for its own sake, but for the unexpected perspectives that build communities and not isolated individuals (Haraway 1988). While this is not an autoethnography, as my methods focus on gathering narratives and understanding the experiences of SEFC, I felt it was important to share my motivation for this project. Despite criticism surrounding researchers situating their personal narrative and ties to their work in their research, I chose to share my experience and my inspiration for this project and understand the academic barriers SEFC face openly and honestly as a researcher who has ties to this community. See Appendix A for my phenomenological experience in the foster care system.

Literature Review

As of 2018, 463,000 youth are involved in the child welfare system, and more than half reside in foster homes (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2020). Children often enter the foster care system for multiple reasons. From neglect to abuse, it is often a traumatic and life altering experience (Avant, 2021). Only 50% of SEFC graduate from high school, and post-secondary education is often not a readily available option (Morton, 2018). A college education often comes as a secondary goal for SEFC when safety and stability needs are not met. When SEFC can find the means and security to pursue college, they often do not graduate due to obstacles, including but not limited to these six, outlined by Dworsky and Perez (2010): “(a) the child welfare system does not encourage post-secondary education, (b) youth are not prepared for college work, (c) youth cannot rely on family for financial or emotional support, (d) youth are unaware of financial aid opportunities, (e) youth may experience more mental health issues than their non-foster classmates, and (f) student services on colleges are ill- prepared to work with youth in care” (Avant, 2021; 2). There are an overwhelming number of obstacles faced by SEFC when trying to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Despite this, 70-80% of SEFC aspire to go to college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003).

A bachelor’s degree is a respected accomplishment in the United States (Morton, 2018), and a difficult task for many emerging adults. Jeffrey Arnett’s concept of “emerging adulthood” describes those aged 18-25 as being separate from both adolescence and young adulthood (2015). It is a time “distinguished by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations” (Arnett, 2015: 47). Compared to previous generations, emerging adults are increasingly getting married later,

going to college at higher rates, and are free to explore their identities more in the context of independence (Arnett, 2015).

Demographically, those who are 18-25 years old are the most diverse in their social, economic, and political lives (Arnett, 2015). Arnett's research shows that emerging adulthood can be a particularly challenging and unexpected life stage that has freedom for exploration but also uncertainty from not knowing one's place in society (2015). Some scholars have criticized Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood for failing to describe the experiences of low-income and first-generation college students (Silva, 2012; Weinberger, 2017). Many working class, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) youth do not have the same privileged ability to explore their identities in a prolonged adolescence the way that their white, working to middle-class counterparts might (Silva, 2012).

For SEFC, emerging adulthood is a critical life stage in which it is necessary to find a stable safety net to survive. SEFC who age out or emancipate out of the foster care system from an institution often lack the privilege to be able to explore their identities and livelihoods like other emerging adults, because their survival is at stake. It is imperative to understand what at-risk SEFC need to be successful in college, since most who attend universities are often struggling with emotional, psychological, and physical barriers more intensely than the average college student. First generation and low income students often struggle because they lack mentorship from parents and elders in their families on how to navigate college (Silva, 2012). Similarly, low income and first generation students often do not have the connections or knowledge about office hours, study habits and resources (Day et. Al, 2011). With the background of growing up in the

foster care system, being an emerging adult becomes even more difficult.

Survivalist Self Reliance

SEFC often cope with the struggles that occur in navigating college with what Samuels and Pryce (2008) describe as “survivalist self-reliance”. Survivalist self-reliance is both a skill and a barrier when it comes to SEFC achieving a bachelor’s degree. While SEFC are often proud of what they accomplished and survived, there may be a resistance to asking for help due to a strong sense of independence (Morton, 2018; Samuels and Pryce, 2008; Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Samuels and Pryce explore this notion of survivalist self-reliance in a qualitative study examining what this concept meant to SEFC (Samuels and Pryce 2008).

The young adults we spoke to frequently viewed dependence on others or expressing personal and psychological vulnerability as posing a risk to one's independence and success. In the meaning they attached to their diverse stories, all extolled the importance for foster youth to learn early on how to be (and survive being) independent. Two aspects of survivalist self-reliance are explored here. First, these young adults actively reframed emotional pain tied to the past as relevant only as a source of strength and pride to buttress their self-reliance. Secondly, young adults often disavowed dependence on others as a means of protecting their self-reliant identities and pride (Samuels and Pryce 2008).

Survivalist self-reliance significantly impacts SEFC’s ability to succeed academically. While survivalist self-reliance is a helpful coping skill in the foster care system—when one is separated from family and going through emotional and physical trauma—it tends to be a detriment when surviving the hurdles of college. When navigating college, self-reliance and independence can be a major inhibitor when SEFC need to ask for help from campus support programs, professors, and mental health services. For the SEFC I spoke with, asking for help felt detrimental to their personal agency and prevented them from being able to access services they need to graduate.

Strengths Perspective

Sociologist Toni Watt has explored how SEFC navigate higher education using a "strengths perspective" (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013: 1409). The strengths perspective is a paradigm shift that encourages social workers to focus on SEFC strengths and resilience instead of "deficits, dysfunction and pathology" (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013:1410). The strengths perspective steers social workers away from seeing SEFC as incapable and doomed to fail by instead, highlighting their resilience as survivors (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Watt explains that "deficit identities were a common consequence of growing up in the foster care system that could hinder higher education outcomes" (Watt, Norton & Jones 2013:1411). Social workers were often unknowingly labeling and hindering the success of SEFC by naming the reality of their traumatic situations as a deficit to their character (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). The concept of deficit identities also pathologizes youth, making SEFC feel that there is inherent inadequacy due to their specific background (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). SEFC often internalize insecurity that goes along with the label of being a "foster kid", leading to imposter syndrome (Ramsey and Brown, 2020). Imposter syndrome is a feeling SEFC encounter when being surrounded by people who do not share their unique circumstance and experiences, leading to feeling out of place, as if they are an imposter and do not belong in academia. It is important for SEFC to have a healthy sense of self that enables them to see themselves as capable of succeeding in higher education.

Like Watt, Avant's research aims to address the unique problems SEFC face using an "ecological systems lens", which considers their multiple cultural and personal identities (Avant, 2021). This lens demonstrates how "access to support, resources and validation from their social environment can determine their overall health and social

functioning”(Avant, 2021). Often the foster care system neither encourages nor gives foster care youth the tools to successfully complete a degree. The ecological system lens considers the backgrounds of SEFC that often involve “overlapping caregiving systems, multiple school systems, and engagement with formalized social services as part of the foster care experience” (Avant, 2021:3).

Ethnographies by anthropologists, such as Mimi Nichter, have challenged the pathologizing approach to youth’s behaviour, showing through in depth ethnography how issues youth face are complex and nuanced. Risk taking can shape identity, social relationships and is often used as a tool in understanding one’s role in life (Nichter, 2015). Like the strength’s perspective and ecological systems lens with SEFC, Nichter uses her work to show that risk taking among youth is highly contextual. Depending on the context, youth are motivated to take risks for personal growth, achievement, and enjoyment (Ravert and Gomez, 2015).

Nichter describes in her research how youth feel and interpret risk in the context of leaving the home and their parents to expand their identity and relationships in the university setting. Nichter’s approach to researching youth centers the contextual background in which youth express their agency and steers away from pathologizing their choices. Similarly, for SEFC, it is important to see their unique circumstances and history as a strength rather than a shortfall or challenge (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Nichter’s approach can be applied to SEFC by considering the context of their unique cultural and personal identities. SEFC have a perspective that many traditional undergraduate students do not. Surviving various levels of trauma is a strength, not a weakness or deficit. Nichter’s anthropological approach highlights the need for ethnographies and qualitative

data on SEFC's academic success.

As mentioned earlier, SEFC often seek a higher education because it is one of the best options that can provide a safety net after aging out of the foster care system. On average, 30,000 foster care youth age out and lose their safety net in the form of a foster home and financial support as soon as they turn 18 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2010). Homelessness is often experienced at a much higher rate for SEFC compared to traditional emerging adults, which is why it is so imperative SEFC have the tools to pass classes they need to graduate as especially susceptible emerging adults (Fowler, 2017). "Participation in higher education can provide stability, a sense of purpose, mentors, and community, all during the critical transition to young adulthood" (Watt, 2020: 1). For SEFC, a higher education is critical because they rarely have the support or safety nets traditional emerging adults have do.

Further, there are very few studies of SEFC that "have investigated institutional factors as predictors of degree completion", which is a major gap in the literature (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Okpych and Courtney did a longitudinal study examining background factors of SEFC and characteristics of the institution SEFC enroll in that contribute to their ability to successfully complete a bachelor's degree (2018). This study found that institutions that spent more on academic support increased the odds that SEFC would successfully complete their college degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). However, one limitation of this study is that it does not address the academic aspects of SEFC's college experience qualitatively (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Numerous states have legislative policies in place to support former foster care

youth in college, such as allocating funds for tuition waivers and ETV (education, training and vocational) grants (Tobolowsky, 2019). However, this is only one step in preparing SEFC for success in higher education (Tobolowsky, 2019). “Hurdles identified include poor preparation for postsecondary work, economic insecurity due to the absence of a financial safety net or family support, unstable housing, and ongoing mental health issues” (Tobolowsky, 2019: 5-6). Research shows that programs such as Independent Living Skills classes, are highly ineffective in preparing SEFC for academic success (Fowler, 2017).

Supports in Place for SEFC

In 2008, Toni Watt and Christine Norton both saw an opportunity to help SEFC by creating a mentoring program at Texas State University (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Watt and Norton expanded this as an official support services program located at the office of Student Retention called FACES (Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success), to serve SEFC needs and offer support while attending college. FACES at Texas State University has provided incredible support to SEFC and taken monumental steps in providing SEFC with the opportunities for success. FACES provides mentorship, activities, meetings, knowledge about resources such as grants and scholarships and a sense of community with other SEFC. FACES has given innumerable support and resources to SEFC at Texas State University and is continuing to monitor the ways in which their program is working and providing much needed assistance to SEFC (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013).

Recently, there has been an ongoing momentum to increase support to SEFC attending higher education across the nation. There have been similar statewide initiatives to create campus support programs for SEFC (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). However,

Watt describes the need to have programs across the nation evaluated to see whether they are benefitting SEFC and in what ways they can improve (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). In Watt's case study, she evaluates the effectiveness of new campus support groups for SEFC. Watt includes an evaluation of FACES as well from the SEFC that utilize their resources. FACES also helps SEFC with on campus employment by having them lead campus tours. SEFC leading campus tours helped inspire other foster care alumni graduating high school to pursue a university level education (Watt, Norton & Jones). She also found that the strengths perspective incorporated in the FACES program was incredibly valuable to students in raising their self-esteem (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013).

Watt and Norton found that FACES has helped students remarkably; however, one area SEFC still struggle in is academics. An important part of the campus support program evaluation Watt conducted shows low GPAs for the students and a lack of improvement pre- and post-FACES (Watt, Norton & Jones). Nationally, their graduation rate is lower, but at Texas State University their graduation rate is on par with general Texas State student population (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). The study shows that SEFC have lower GPAs than Texas State students, particularly that of Freshmen (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). It also demonstrates that SEFC GPAs have not increased with the FACES program (Watt, Norton & Jones).

This study shows that SEFC still struggle academically, and FACES has not been able to help with their academic barriers. One deficit in the FACES program is a lack of tutoring services that are tailored to the needs of SEFC specifically (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). Further, Watt explains that their "study is one of only a few documented investigations of academic outcomes of foster care alumni in higher education" (Davis,

2006; Day et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). My research takes a holistic approach by examining their experiences with academic and emotional barriers and facilitators. Much of the existing literature describes campus support programs but does not address their effects or if they are impacting academic performance specifically (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013).

Another study shows that SEFC who were engaged in a campus support program and received financial support in the form of an ETV were most likely to persist through their college degree (Okypch et. al, 2020). Campus support programs for SEFC are implemented with the goal of supporting students with “financial aid, housing, and academic challenges”, however this study does not address markers of college progress, such as credit accumulation, grades, and how many times students retake courses (Okypch, et. al, 2020). The limitations of this study highlight the need to understand how SEFC are doing academically.

Additionally, Brenda Morton led a four-year longitudinal study using qualitative analysis to understand what challenges SEFC face while trying to obtain a bachelor’s degree. With the trauma and mental health issues that come with surviving the foster care system, such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, it is no small feat for SEFC to pursue a higher education (Morton, 2018). Often, SEFC have lived in many different placements, switching through multiple schools, which can lead to them missing the credits to graduate and lack of confidence in their capabilities to do so (Morton 2018).

Similarly, Morton found many barriers SEFC faced while taking classes, namely: poor mental health, difficulty controlling emotions especially when talking about sensitive topics such as sexual assault and PTSD, skipping class due to anxiety, and

embarrassment (Morton 2018). There are many SEFC who were not able to see the value in obtaining a bachelor's degree when dealing with mental health issues. This study highlights "mental health as a significant challenge/barrier to academic achievement" (Morton 2018: 80). There have been many efforts to create university support programs to help with academics, resources, and financial/social help, but unfortunately few "programs include mental health and the data on the effectiveness of these existing programs is lacking"(Morton, 2018: 80).

The trauma and barriers foster care alumni experience regarding academics are supported throughout the literature (Avant, 2021; Morton, 2018; Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013; Okpych, 2020; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). I aim to utilize a qualitative approach that centers the narratives of SEFC themselves to understand mental health and academic barriers. While some universities offer campus support programs, SEFC are often reluctant to utilize these resources, especially when campus support programs have not implemented a strength's perspective (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013; Samuels and Pryce, 2008; Morton, 2018). According to existing literature, there could be a multitude of reasons for this. From internalizing deficit identities to survivalist self-reliance, it is important to understand why SEFC are unlikely to utilize these resources (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013; Samuels and Pryce, 2008).

Current literature identifies academic and mental health challenges faced by SEFC but does not explore their experiences trying to navigate the many hurdles they face. My thesis addresses the multitude of factors that inhibit and facilitate academic success for SEFC and contribute to the field of anthropology greatly due to the lack of qualitative research on this subject. Using an ethnographic approach, my research

investigates whether SEFC feel there are barriers and facilitators to their academic success and why. I consider how survivalist self-reliance is both an inhibitor and facilitator for SEFC when trying to achieve academic success. By taking a multidimensional approach to understanding the academic barriers SEFC face, my research encompasses a more well-rounded view of the types of resources SEFC need to be academically successful. Additionally, I worked with Dr. Toni Watt, who is one of the founders of FACES, the Chair of the Sociology Department and has done extensive research on this topic, to address the specific academic needs of SEFC.

Theory

Paul-Michel Foucault focused on truly breaking down the many problems involved in the ideas of governance, docile bodies, and biopolitics. Foucault proclaims that a body is docile in “that it may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1984: 182). As Foucault explains:

The historical moment of the disciplines was now when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skill, or at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes more obedient as it becomes more useful and conversely (182).

This theory is crucial in providing a framework for understanding how students who have experienced foster care navigate their identities while operating under structures that enforce docility.

When I look back at my experience living in institutionalized care, Foucault’s theory speaks to me on a visceral level. I was living in a group home with 50 other children, two of whom were my siblings. I had to go to chapel every Sunday, wake up and go to bed at the same time every day, I was not allowed cellphone access, I had to do community service on the ranch and be under constant supervision by a staff member or

house parent. If I did not shower, or did not want to eat dinner, I would be written up. Three write ups meant I would be forced to spend the night at what they call the intense rehabilitation center. These were cell like rooms that had one metal toilet, no windows and one mat to sleep on, and a rather creepy picture of an angel holding a child¹. These examples go to show how docile a child's body can become.

Foucault's lens of docile bodies exemplifies how the state treats "their" children while in care. "For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death" (Foucault Reader, 1984; 258). The state has not only the privilege to separate a child from their parents, but also the privilege to no longer provide care for youth who have experienced foster care (YEFC) as soon as they emancipate on their 18th birthday. Homelessness and jail time are often experienced at a much higher rate for YEFC compared to other emerging adults, which is why it is so imperative SEFC have the tools to pass classes they need to graduate as especially susceptible emerging adults (Fowler, 2017). Understanding the extent of SEFC's experience while living in care is necessary to administrators, faculty, professors, and their peers. The way in which SEFC navigated institutionalized care has informed their habitus and how they navigate their university education. Further, the State intends to integrate SEFC into the future lumpen proletariat. In Marxist terminology, this term refers to the unpolitical lower levels of society who are not interested in revolutionary

¹ Here is a news article about the institution I lived in that contains pictures of the rehabilitation center. <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/politics/article/Federal-judge-reacts-to-cinder-block-cells-14828991.php>

advancement (Thoburn 2002). Similar techniques of control and docility that are used in the Prison-industrial complex are also used on the children living in institutionalized foster homes.

Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus as a particular way of viewing the world through the accumulation of one's earliest experience (Bourdieu, 1990). A habitus is a characteristic of the individual but can also apply to a group of individuals who belong to a certain economic, political, or social class. "The habitus predisposes individuals to think only about certain possibilities and ignore others" (Bourdieu, 1990: 499). Those who have grown up in the foster care system in the United States have a habitus that is different from other traditional undergraduate students (those who entered college directly out of high school and did not experience the foster care system). From surviving years of trauma and differing placements, they may react strongly to feelings of insecurity in grades or schoolwork. Therefore, it is important to hear the narratives of foster youth because university policy makers, staff and faculty can develop a new mode of support taking this into account. SEFC might not be inclined to utilize resources on campus because of their habitus. Asking for help can put them in survival mode and feel like a fault of character. To not ask for help is an unconscious reaction informed by years of trauma and the intimidating nature of the hierarchical university system. SEFC have both a habitus of their lived experience and the habitus of the social class in which they exist that does not necessarily align with experiences of traditional undergraduate students.

Similarly, SEFC experience the added barrier of navigating an educational institution where former modes of behavior such as independence and self-reliance, are

no longer a useful habitus in the environment of the education system. Bourdieu uses an example of Don Quixote: “Don Quixote, a man living in the sixteenth or seventeenth century imagines himself to be a knight errant of the twelfth century” (Bourdieu, 1990: 508). In this example, Don Quixote is living in a context in which his habitus and past experiences do not work for him, but against him. For SEFC, being in a university is often a radically different context from where they came. Academics, going to office hours, and knowing about resources are not often something SEFC understand how to navigate (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Okpych, 2020).

Bourdieu claims that our habitus relies on our early childhood experiences when considering new information. If SEFC are feeling overwhelmed from struggling academically, they may react based on childhood trauma experiences (Bruskas, 2008). Specifically, for SEFC who have PTSD, depression, and other mental health issues, they may react to a failing grade as if it were a life-or-death issue (Bruskas, 2008). In fact, for SEFC it may very well feel like a life-or-death issue, when they do not have a safety net other than a university education.

Bourdieu discusses social, cultural, and economic capital. Social capital is “made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility” (Bourdieu, 1990; 16). Knowing how the education system works and being able to make connections with professors and peers is a form of social capital. SEFC often lack the ability to invest time in others and gain social capital due to constant change of relationships and not having the knowledge of how to approach professors and peers to make meaningful, beneficial connections (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). SEFC do have a

valuable type of cultural capital: resilience (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). SEFC have important contributions and perspectives because of their unique circumstances (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013). It is essential that they are given the tools and resources to be successful academically.

Political theorist and social feminist Iris Young offers a theoretical lens to understand the ways in which SEFC are oppressed. She discusses the five faces of oppression as: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Those who have the traumatic experience of surviving childhood in foster homes and homes in which their biological families were abusive and neglectful have undoubtedly experienced one or more of these faces of oppression. Young describes cultural imperialism as a form of oppression that silences and makes invisible those who do not fit into the hegemonic culture (Young, 1990). Young explains how “the dominant culture's stereotyped, marked, and interiorized images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the degree that they are forced to react to behaviors of others that express or are influenced by those images” (Young, 1990: 286). As Young proclaims, the “other” is often forced to view themselves through the lens of the privileged group (Young, 1990). When SEFC are surrounded by peers who have family and know how to navigate school and bureaucratic institutions because their privileged position as unmarked, SEFC start to internalize inadequacy. SEFC desire the recognition to know that they are human and capable of achieving academic success.

In this work, I have aimed to understand the situated perspective of SEFC and what they need to be academically successful when operating under these five faces of oppression. Not only do SEFC internalize inadequacy from their own biological and

foster families, but they are also excluded in mainstream university culture from lack of knowledge of resources and connections.

Cultural Intimacy (2016) by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld discusses how traditions and icons can be used to create intimacy and endear yourself to your community. Cultural intimacy is “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation.” (3) The dominant narrative in the media often portrays the nuclear family and neglects to acknowledge or validate the realities of the foster care system and those that exist outside of the dominant nuclear family social structure. Growing up in foster care is a form of cultural intimacy in that it is a source of external embarrassment to those who are outsiders but allows those inside this community with a common sociality. Further, it is often an invisible identity unless it is being discussed with other people who have experienced care. It is invisible because it attacks the dominant cultural narrative of family in the United States. Herzfeld discusses the idea of structural nostalgia as “the longing for an age before the state, for the primordial and self-regulating birthright that the state continually invokes” (Herzfeld 2016, 22). Family is a birthright that is often taken for granted by many Americans.

The reality of living in institutionalized care is rarely discussed by those who have no intimate ties with the community. Even more, to have a family and go through life without ever questioning your familial ties is privileged by the dominant narrative of a nuclear family. When applying this theoretical lens of cultural intimacy to my work, I

examine and ask what family means to the students I interview and how they feel when seeing events like Bobcat family weekend events or father-daughter dances in high school. Events like these represent the structural nostalgia of the dominant community who have the privilege to attend these events. Cultural Icons can be seen in the form t-shirts and sweaters in the Bobcat store that say phrase like “Texas State Dad” and “Texas State Mom”.

Herzfeld discusses cultural intimacy as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation (p. 3).” It can be embarrassing to be seen as a child of the state when talking to those who have family privilege. However, within the community, there is a sense of pride that you survived the foster care system.

Further, in the *Invention of Tradition* (2012), Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger discuss how traditions come to be. Holidays such as Mother’s Day and Father’s Day reinforce the tradition of the nuclear family as the only valid familial structure. Hobsbawm and Ranger explain that traditions are invented to normalize cultural practices that do not necessarily exist historically or universally. For example, they discuss the idea of the Highland Tradition in Scotland as being invented despite appearing as a long-standing cultural tradition. The traditional holidays and events that celebrate the nuclear family are invented to maintain the appearance of a structured kinship. Many youths who emancipated out of care do not have a traditional nuclear family. Throughout this work, I

draw on Hobsbawn and Rangers' theoretical lens of invented traditions.

Methods

My data collection methods included nine in depth interviews and participant observation at FACES meetings throughout the Fall semester of 2021. To truly capture the stories SEFC have, I used two methods: semi-structured interviews and participant observation in FACES meetings. At these meetings, I participated as a SEFC myself and interacted with students at a peer level. My goals during this research were to understand and unpack the academic experience these students have while attending Texas State University. While I had hoped to recruit more participants, I am extremely grateful and appreciative of the nine who were willing to participate, as the SEFC population at Texas State University is a very small fraction of the student population. To recruit SEFC, I presented my research to two undergraduate social work classes and while I gained no participants from these presentations, the students mentioned knowing many youths in the foster care system that were not yet 18 years old and were willing to direct me to them. As children under the age of 18 are considered a protected class of human subjects by the institutional Review Board, it was not feasible within the timeline of the MA program to interact with these youth and gain their narratives, but it was encouraging to see how many social work students were interested in my work and wanted to help. I chose to present to social work classes because the two SEFC that I interviewed prior majored in this field or a similar field like psychology. Further, I worked with Dr. Norton to post multiple recruitment messages and fliers in the FACES Facebook page and Group Me as well as while attending meetings. All my participants were current FACES members at the time of our interviews. Six of the students I interviewed were recruited through "snowball recruitment" (Bernard 2011).

Throughout the recruitment experience, I changed inclusion criteria for my participants. Originally, I planned on only interviewing traditional undergraduate students who were currently enrolled at Texas State University and were between the ages of 18-24 years old. Traditional refers to students who enrolled in college directly after graduating from high school. Quickly, I learned that many of the SEFC at Texas State University do not have traditional journeys and this recruitment qualification would not serve me in understanding the nuanced experiences SEFC have while attending Texas State University. Many had been in and out of school for several years, dropped out, were in graduate school and in various places in their academic journey. Consequently, I decided that the only qualification I needed for this research was that the students needed to have some experience in the foster care system and some experience with higher education.

I audio recorded all in-depth interviews. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I primarily utilized Zoom (a video conference interface) to conduct interviews. Individual semi-structured interviews (one per participant) lasted approximately one hour, and I took field notes while conducting all interviews and participant observations. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I decided not to conduct focus groups. At the end of each interview, I asked each participant to fill out a brief, two-page demographic survey on Qualtrics detailing the types of activities and clubs they are engaged in, how they are paying for college and their specific background in the foster care system. This included questions about time spent in the system, whether they were adopted/reunited with family, and at what age. This allowed me to contextualize their narratives within their foster care background. Participant observation at FACES meetings allowed me to

understand how SEFC communicate academic struggles in a setting that was more natural, as opposed to an interview. For the confidentiality of participants, all names were replaced with pseudonyms. I submitted my research to the IRB (Institutional Review Board) in late spring of 2021 and was approved in April of 2021.

Description of Sample

Texas State University (TSU) is a vibrant, diverse, and beautiful institution located in San Marcos, Texas. In the year of 2020 there were 33,123 undergraduate students enrolled at Texas State University. TSU is a traditionally Hispanic Serving Institution and has a diverse student body (Texas State University 2020). Currently, the student population at TSU is forty-four percent White, thirty eight percent Hispanic or Latino/x, nine percent Black or African American, three percent two or more races, and 3 percent Asian (Texas State University 2020). Sixty-three percent of undergraduates enrolled are female and thirty nine percent are male.

I interviewed one male and eight females. Six self-identified as Hispanic, Mexican American or Latino, one identified as Black/African American, one identified as African American/White/Mixed, and one identified as white. According to Children Welfare Information Gateway for the year of 2019, youth entering the foster care system were forty-four percent white, twenty five percent Black, twenty percent Hispanic, five percent multiracial, two percent American Indian/Alaska Native and one percent Asian. Further, forty eight percent were female, and fifty two percent identified as male (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021).

One student dropped out of graduate school in her fourth semester. One was graduated at the time of our interview and on her way to law school in Houston. Another student was in graduate school for communications in her first semester at Texas State.

Another student was 29 and had been in and out of school for the last nine years. All participants had spent various amounts of time in the foster care system, and this ranged anywhere from two to six years. Five students had been adopted between the ages 9 and 16. Four students had aged out of the foster care system from institutionalized settings. Four students were majoring in psychology, social work, or sociology fields. Two students studied mass communication studies, one student studied exercise and sports science, one student studied animal science, and one student was a theatre major.

When coding and transcribing data, I used thematic and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis can be used with a variety of different research questions (Boyatzis 1998). Thematic analysis is one of the most common methods used to analyze qualitative data. As a qualitative researcher, I chose to use thematic analysis to generate themes regarding how participants think, understand, feel, or interpret a certain experience. Where discourse analysis focuses more on discourse and theory, thematic analysis focuses on coding for themes that are common between participants that belong to a specific subset of the population, such as SEFC. It relies primarily on coding interviews as well as literature. The biggest and most important step in thematic analysis occurs through coding. Thematic analysis happens in the act of coding text itself. Familiarization with the text and other research is the first step in thematic analysis as it involves going through and rereading previous interviews, focus groups, direct and participant observation notes as well as previous literature.

Supplementing this method of analysis, I also implemented discourse analysis. Discourse analysis aims to “shed light on the creation and maintenance of social norms, the construction of personal and group identities, and the negotiation of social and

political interaction (Starks, 2007: 3)". Discourse analysis utilizes big "D" and little "d" discourse. Big "D" discourse in this context refers to the larger socio-political-economic context in which discourse occurs. For example, structural violence, Marxism, and agency are examples of big "D" discourse. Little "d" discourse, the actual discourse of participants, takes place in their conversations and is made meaningful in the context of big "D" discourse. Discourse analysis permitted me to situate the experiences and perspectives of SEFC in the context of big "D" discourse, such as the strengths perspective, survivalist self-reliance, and the hierarchical nature of institutions.

I used a qualitative approach to understand the complexities and nuances SEFC experience navigating the challenges of higher education. Foucault claims that "one has to analyze power relations from the bottom up and not from the top down, and to study the myriad ways in which the subjects themselves are constituted in these diverse but intersecting networks" (Gutting et al, 2019). Gathering narratives from SEFC who know their stories and histories better than anyone else is a bottom-up approach in identifying how SEFC navigate barriers and facilitators while maintaining the grades to be able to graduate college.

Additionally, I shared my research findings with the faculty and staff at FACES, as well as Dr. Toni Watt, a research specialist on this topic and one of my committee members. It is my goal that my research on students who have experienced foster care will provide knowledge to the FACES program that can be implemented in the form of program development and provide services SEFC feel they need to be successful in higher education. I also aim to contribute to anthropological research on the academic barriers and facilitators SEFC face in higher education. Further, I intend to contribute to

the growing body of research on SEFC and how their individual and cultural identities intersect in higher education systems, campus support programs, and mental health.

II. AS AN SEFC WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED?

At the start of each interview, I asked SEFC the open-ended question of what factors led them to want to pursue college? Students mentioned several barriers while navigating the process of enrollment. From the nine students I interviewed, there were a total of 15 different stressors that came up. Many of the students I interviewed explained feeling “left in the dark” and “forgotten” through the process of navigating admissions. The top three challenges SEFC spoke about were not understanding how to obtain a tuition fee waiver, not having any biological or foster family members that knew how to help them enroll, and internalized feelings of inadequacy that led them to think they could not apply. These challenges came up in every interview multiple times. The first major challenge SEFC described was a lack of mentorship, resources and knowledge when trying to obtain and understand the legislative policy and terms associated with the tuition waiver. The second major challenge SEFC described was having bad caseworkers and a lack of emotional support from family when trying to enroll and understand how to complete their application for college, write essays and complete their FASFA application.

Tuition is waived but is the road paved?

When navigating admissions into Texas State University, one of the first challenges SEFC describe is having to learn a plethora of bureaucratic language skills to understand the tuition and fee waiver. Tuition and fee waivers are one of the main resources used by foster youth to reduce the financial burden of attending college (Watt and Faulkner 2020). Tuition and fee waivers are administered in 22 out of 50 States and have many qualifications. (Watt and Faulkner 2020). There are stipulations on whether a

former foster youth qualifies for a tuition waiver, and many of the students I interviewed spoke about the difficulties that came with trying to secure a waiver. Only 1-11% of SEFC obtain a college degree, compared to the 32.5% of the general population which is why a tuition waiver is so vital for these students (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006a, Pecora et al., 2006b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buher, 2015; Wolanin, 2005). Texas was one of the first States to offer a tuition waiver to youth who have experienced care and has the broadest qualifications for the tuition and fee waiver (Watt and Faulkner 2020). However, in a recent study conducted in 2020 by Watt and Faulkner they found that of the SFEC who qualify, only 40% of SEFC utilize tuition waivers. My interviews contribute to understanding how students found out about their tuition waivers and what barriers they faced while trying to find information regarding the waiver and whether they qualify.

While doing research about the experiences SFEC face, I want to expand on the language and politics that surround the tuition and fee waiver. This tuition waiver confused many students specifically in linguistic terms like Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC). “Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) is a legal term in Texas used in child custody cases. It means that a judge appoints a person to be legally responsible for a child without adopting the child”². If they adopt the child, the child is no longer eligible for a tuition and fee waiver. Kinship Care is also a term that is confusing to students I spoke with. Kinship care is a term used to describe “Relatives and other people who the child or family have a significant relationship can often provide children

² https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Adoption/Adoption_or_PMC.asp

with stability when they can't live with their birth parents”³ and the term is other signifier used to discuss whether a YEFC should qualify for a tuition and fee waiver. YEFC navigate multiple different placements in their time in the foster care system and it is difficult to keep track of the linguistic and procedural terms the State uses to define these placements (Morton 2018). Language and procedural barriers that surround the tuition and fee waiver are difficult to interpret for many SEFC I spoke with.

Further, Texas has a Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program that serves to help youth in foster care prepare to live as an adult after being in foster care⁴. PAL workers help youth who have experienced care (YEFC) transition out of State custody and are supposed to help YEFC with after foster care goals. However, many of the youth I spoke with talked about not benefitting from this program, and at times not being able to even contact people working in the PAL program. Conversations with caseworkers, PAL workers, foster parents, and Student Business Services are all mentioned in the student’s attempt to negotiate their qualifications. Anthropologist Keith Murphy discusses in his ethnographic work how language and design are used to negotiate the cultural, social, political, and economic ways of life (Murphy 2015). The language and legislative practices that go into the design of the tuition waiver are inaccessible to many of the youth I spoke with, and Murphy’s ethnographic work can be used as a lens to describe the tuition waiver as a highly political object. The tuition waiver is not a neutral

³ https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Kinship_Care/default.asp

⁴ https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/child_protection/Youth_and_Young_Adults/Preparation_For_Adult_Living/default.asp

object created by legislative policy in an accessible way. All design reflects the political and cultural aspects of our lives. The tuition waiver is very difficult to interpret for someone who is not a lawyer and familiar with legislative language and is not widely advertised or understood by the SEFC I spoke with.

Further, the tuition and fee waiver can also be understood through Foucault's biopolitics. Biopolitics refers to the ways in which power is enforced through the regulation of biological functions such as sex, death, birth, and reproduction-- to reproduce society as whole. Politicians, police, bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, and teachers all play a hand in reinforcing the power of the State by their intense regulation of bodies and how they live and reproduce. While the State of Texas offers SEFC a generous offer in the form of a tuition and fee waiver, many students I spoke with did not know about their waiver and even if they did know about it, they were hesitant to self-disclose their history in the foster care system. In this sense, the tuition and fee waiver become an appendage of the biopolitical state where it exists legislatively but is inaccessible in the lived-in experiences of foster youth. There is little to no awareness about the tuition waiver and many SEFC spoke about having to find it themselves or just happening to stumble upon a tuition and fee waiver. Many of the SEFC I spoke with discussed how having to self-identify as a foster youth on their FASFA and negotiating their qualifications on the tuition waiver made them feel uncomfortable and ashamed. In the case of the tuition waiver and FASFA applications, the State is exercising its biopolitical power through appendages like the tuition waiver and FASFA applications by having the privilege to require SEFC to detail deeply personal and traumatic life experiences so that they may have the chance to go to college.

Many SEFC I interviewed described multiple obstacles they faced while trying to obtain a tuition waiver. One student, Hernandez, a soft-spoken Freshman who had just started his first semester at Texas State University, explained how he had to contact multiple people in his efforts to find out whether he qualified for a tuition and fee waiver. For a long time, he thought he would join the Military like his brother or find a job straight out of Highschool. Hernandez told me:

I grew up in a bad neighborhood. I'm aware of that now. A poor and rundown place and none of my family members ever went to college, and I think some of them didn't even finish high school only until my older brother did [finish high school] and he wants to go the army.

Hernandez was put in a placement with his grandmother at the age of nine after living in institutional placement settings and group homes for two years. Hernandez experienced extreme difficulties trying to navigate the bureaucratic language of permanent guardianship, kinship care and all the other signifiers the State uses to see whether you should qualify for a tuition waiver. As he explains:

I know this is a very weird situation, but no one went to college [in his biological family or kinship placement with his grandmother]. So, I didn't know who to ask [about college]. My grandmother barely knows anything about it. I just had to ask [his grandmother] can you help me find these papers? Where did you leave them? Because, you know, our home was very, very messy and you couldn't find everything right away. Yeah, but like there would be files under the TV, and these important government papers between the closets. So, I had to look, look, look, look, look everywhere for the papers. That's how stressful it was.

I asked Hernandez a follow up question: “Did you end up being able to figure out what kinship placement means and whether or not you would be able to get your tuition waiver?”

Well, I did my own research. I went through foster care.com trying to figure out what happens next. What happens when you're not with your real parents? Is your grandmother considered a real parent? Like I asked a bunch of questions on Google, and only Google. I didn't know where else to go. So, I just kept asking questions.

Through doing his own research, Hernandez was able to figure out how to get a tuition waiver. At first, he was told by a Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) caseworker that because he was in a kinship placement, his tuition could not be waived. After being told this news, he was devastated but decided he could not give up. He continued to ask questions to his old foster parents, school counselors and was finally able to google his way to a tuition waiver. This highlights that despite multiple barriers, Hernandez was resilient. Even though he felt successful in getting his tuition waived, he felt remorse because he could not help his sister secure a tuition waiver as well. This example shows that prior to even setting foot on campus, SEFC survive numerous hurdles in navigating admissions.

Another student, Mari, had similar difficulties securing a tuition waiver. This was compounded by many other factors: feeling like she couldn't write an essay, feeling like she was too behind compared to her peers, and wanting to get a job after high school so she could support her two younger brothers who were also in foster care. When I asked about the process of trying to find a tuition waiver, she explained that:

I didn't know whether I qualified or not [for a tuition waiver] because I know some older kids were adopted but I was 16 and I didn't know whether I would qualify. My brothers were qualified, but I was kind of in this weird state to figure that out, because there's no website or anything that tells you, hey, if you were in foster care from this age or at least for this long you can qualify for free tuition anywhere in Texas, any public school, which is great, but no one knows that. I didn't know that. And I couldn't really get in contact with my caseworker since it was already like, three, four years since I even talked to them. So, my mom [foster mom], we had to like, literally investigate, and see whether I could even qualify to do that.

While she had a tuition waiver, she did not know how to find more information on it. Luckily, her foster mom was willing to help her figure this out. Many other SEFC I spoke with did not have any mentors in their life to help them find or understand their

tuition waiver. Often the foster care system neither encourages nor gives foster care youth the tools to successfully complete a degree (Avant 2021). In this example, both Carlos and Mari navigated admissions into Texas State University with backgrounds that involved overlapping caregiving systems and multiple school systems. Avant's ecological systems lens demonstrates the necessity that SEFC have support pre- and post-college. Despite there being resources for SEFC to use, the information about resources is not easily accessible and their backgrounds in the foster care system makes finding help difficult. Mari also explained that she felt unqualified to write an essay to get admitted to Texas State University and that her peers were more capable and prepared for college than she was. She explains that:

It was that [trying to understand her tuition waiver] and like, trying to figure out how I'm going to write my essays. It's like, oh, essays like everyone could do it. Everyone's always doing like, some like, you know, essays about like, traveling or something like that. And I was like how am I gonna phrase all my experiences in this one essay? That's another thing I found hard to do.

Mari did not think college was even an option for her due to the numerous challenges she had to navigate in high school. She was not only struggling to see if she qualified for a tuition waiver, but she was also doubting her ability to write an essay. She also confided in me that she felt like everyone else in her high school had been thinking and getting ready to apply for college long before the thought of college even crossed her mind. When she was talking to her peers, many of them already knew what they wanted to study and what school they wanted to attend. Like Mari, Monique also struggled with her tuition waiver and FASFA. As she explains:

I was a little left in the dark. So long story short, I was adopted at 16. And they were just going through changes at that time [tuition waiver changes] to where I almost didn't qualify for the waiver, unless I aged out, but because I had a very, very, very hard-working caseworker, and a very, very motivated team behind her and they were able to, like pull some strings for me. So yeah, I was able to get the

tuition waiver.

SEFC must do the work to understand how they are going to be viewed on paper and how this affects the amount of financial aid a student receives. If she includes her foster family's income even though they cannot contribute to her college expenses, she would be deemed not in need of monetary support. If she did not self-disclose that she was adopted at the age of 16, there comes the anxiety of FASFA finding out that she has foster parents and that they may be able to support her even when they cannot. This negotiation of what to disclose versus what not to disclose is a problem many SEFC face. Monique also discussed feeling hesitant in self disclosing her status as a former foster youth. This hesitance came from her feeling like her background in the foster care system would look like a deficit of her character. I use these examples to show how SEFC struggle through navigating admissions because of a lack of support from family, a poor understanding of the tuition and fee waiver, and feeling like they are not qualified enough to attend college.

How SEFC find the path to college

Hernandez faced many other challenges besides trying to secure his tuition and fee waiver when navigating admissions. Hernandez explains how none of his family went to college, but the high school he went to, a small warehouse turned into a high school, was one of the reasons he saw college was an option. He says how:

So, the school that I went to their goal was to help low-class families or people who have low success rates [in attending college]. Like my school is made from a warehouse, apparently. So, they made windows and doors and they just converted that building into a school. And I think their goal was to make everyone go to college. They had like, signs everywhere that are like 100% every day, literally drilled to the wall. Whatever it takes you need to go to college, like literally everywhere, they have college everywhere. We had games that were about college, it was just college, college.

Like other foster youth, Hernandez's first introduction to college was through school. Many SEFC that I spoke with mentioned how the possibility of college was only discussed in their high schools and not through family. Many YEFC move through multiple different placements while in foster care, which is detrimental when considering how important the school system is to the SEFC I spoke with. School is a consistent and secure place for many youths when in the foster care system and the place where every SEFC I spoke with was first introduced to the prospect of college. However, with multiple placements comes multiple high schools which heightens feelings of inadequacy for SEFC. As mentioned previously, SEFC have lived in many different placements, switching through multiple schools, which can lead to them missing the credits to graduate and lack of confidence in their capabilities to do so (Morton 2018). Further, it is difficult for SEFC to maintain relationships with mentors in high school when they continuously move from high school to high school. These examples show how important a tuition and fee waiver are for SEFC which is why it is necessary that this information is more accessible.

Another student, Leslie mentioned how before she came to college, she felt like she was doomed to fail. As she explains:

I didn't know college was an option for me. When I was in high school, I worked at like a McDonald's down the street and my CPS caseworker told me every day that was all I would do and that I wouldn't amount to anything else. I ended up being homeless when I turned 18. My foster family kicked me out. And it wasn't until I turned 20 that I was able to finish my senior year of high school. But during that time, I was on and off doing credit recovery and what not. My counselors and teachers at school run this credit recovery program and they were the ones that told me about, like college and how foster kids can get free tuition and all these things. So, I literally had no idea about college like at all that was never an option for me. And so, when it finally became like an avenue that I could pursue obviously I did it like wholeheartedly, quickly and with a burning passion.

Leslie had to overcome homelessness as well as her Child Protective Services (CPS)

caseworker telling her she would not amount to anything. This example shows how Leslie's caseworker views her through her deficits rather than her strengths. The concept of deficit identities pathologizes youth, making Leslie feel that there is inherent inadequacy due to her being homeless and working at a fast-food restaurant. Thankfully, the teachers and counselors in her high school helped her finish high school even as she was experiencing homelessness.

In "Towards an Ecological Materialism" by Tim Ingold, he discusses our relationship with the material conditions of life (Ingold 2012). Ingold argues that many social scientists fail to acknowledge that material conditions of life are just as important as social conditions (Ingold 2012). Many take their material life for granted, but for SEFC material life is not a guarantee. Another obstacle Leslie faced while navigating admissions was having no parents, or family to help her—something that many often assumed she had which exacerbated difficulties when navigating the process of filling out her FASFA. She told me that:

I feel like there were other obstacles in terms of like, financial aid, or people at admissions that I would have to call and talk to, and they were always like let me just talk to your parents. And I was like, well, that's not possible. I'm telling you all the information that I know because that's all I know. I think things like that where people kind of just assume that there's someone else around to help you and there's not in most cases. So, I think that's probably the only kind of difficulty I had in terms of enrolling and admitting.

Despite all that Leslie had been through she found it most challenging when trying to explain not having parents over and over to Student Business Services and other faculty. In Leslie's perspective, it is embarrassing to be seen as a child of the state when talking to those who have family privilege or trying to explain your positionality outside of a nuclear family schema. However, within the foster care community, there is a sense of pride that you survived the foster care system. For Leslie she named that her most

pressing challenge when navigating admissions into Texas State was having to explain her need for help to people who assume she has parents or other mentors that can help her. Despite being homeless, having to take credit recover classes, and internalizing hurtful speech from her caseworker, Leslie graduated over the Summer of 2020 and was accepted into a Law program in Houston. She hopes to start a career helping other foster youth with her positionality as a lawyer.

III. CHALLENGES NAVIGATING THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

The SEFC I spoke with named multiple circumstances in which they were unsure if they would be able to graduate with a bachelor's degree. These experiences included a lack of emotional support, not feeling heard while seeing Texas State University counselors, having to discuss abuse in class, being in toxic relationships with their significant others, and choosing majors that significantly impacted their mental health. Throughout this chapter, I highlight how SEFC navigate class discussions surrounding abuse and feeling isolated while in college. I also discuss how SEFC navigate challenges and service gaps at Texas State University.

SEFC helping other SEFC: Filling Service Gaps at TSU

When conducting interviews, I wanted to explore what SEFC were studying and what classes they felt passionate about. In the beginning of each interview, SEFC responded with their interests to help other former foster youth. SEFC were motivated by the force of their experiences to help other SEFC succeed in a pay it forward style. This of course, can be a challenging form of emotional labor for someone who has been through trauma and can take a huge toll on mental health. Sarah, a soft-spoken sophomore who had just been accepted into the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program at Texas State University was the first student I interviewed. She mentioned how her goals to pursue a career in social work were spearheaded by her desire to not only show other SEFC that they are capable of success, but also to prove to herself, her incompetent and ineffective caseworkers, and her future children that she was capable as well. As Sarah explains:

When I first attended Texas State, I wanted to be a lawyer and I knew they had a good law program. But then I changed my mind. And I was like, no, my heart is

with social work, and Texas State University has a good social work program.

When I asked Sarah what motivated her to pursue social work, she said:

I just really remembered everything my caseworker did for me because I had a whole bunch of bad case workers who just made it seem like it was all about money. I'm in extended foster care and now I've known her [her caseworker] for over four years. And she's great I can talk to her about anything. And to me she was the first person to ever make me feel like it wasn't about money, that she genuinely cared a lot. And I loved that. And she was kind of able to let me see that, like I had a lot of hatred towards my parents, my biological parents for everything that happened. And she was the one caseworker who wasn't like, bashing my parents, and who got me to get rid of that hatred.

Due to the care her case worker showed her and the trauma she had experienced before, she wanted to give back and help other youth in the foster care system. She said she wanted to make sure that no child feels they are worthless and wants to help them learn the difference between toxic and healthy behaviors. At the time of our interview, Sarah was passionate to start helping other foster youth. Her experience in the foster care system motivated her to help the foster care community. When I asked Sarah about what motivated her to go to college, she explained that she moved states to be put in kinship care with her aunt. When Sarah told her aunt she wanted to pursue Law School, she was supportive. However, her aunt was not supportive of her decision to change from Law to Social work. Later in our conversation, she mentioned that:

I even brought up to my aunt that I wanted to do social work. And my aunt kind of just laughed at me. and was like, it's a stressful job. And it just kind of causes anxiety and depression. And I suffer from anxiety and depression, and she was just like, it will make it worse for you. And, you know it does, sometimes it does make it a little worse for me.

Despite having anxiety and depression, she still wanted to practice in Social Work. She mentioned that this type of degree does make her mental health worse, but her desire to help foster youth is a driving force. Further, when speaking with her biological father, the conversation of her attending college was one of the only conversations she had with him

that did not result in a fight. In Sarah's narrative, she discusses how pursuing her education is the only positive connection she has with her father. Other SEFC I spoke with also discussed how their relationships with both their biological and foster families affected their mental health while in school.

Monique also expressed her desire to help other SEFC. Monique is a vibrant, extroverted graduate student studying mass communication at Texas State University. Starting off our interview I asked about her classes, what she likes and does not like. She told me that she took a year off because of the Covid-19 pandemic but knew she wanted to go back because she wanted to teach someday and mentor other SEFC. She really enjoys her relational communication class because it delves deep into intimate relationships. She mentioned specifically how it goes beyond courtship and dating and explores getting justice within our intimate relationships. She wants to learn more about family communication because of her background in the foster care system and feels like the classes she takes allows her to learn what it means to get justice in interpersonal relationships, something she has struggled with due to her foster care background. She went on to talk about how this is one of her favorite classes because it helps her understand how to create healthy boundaries with her biological and foster family.

Similarly, another student named Mari is currently working to help other foster youth at the San Marcos Youth Council.

I work at the greater San Marcos Youth Council. We do cater to foster care kids specifically, like those who are getting introduced into foster care. We help them out and kind of introduce them to hopefully not their new life, but what their future is going to be now.

In these examples, Sarah, Monique, and Mari are united in their drive to help others who have experienced similar trauma. This drive has led all three to pursue higher education

and, in the case of Mari, community volunteer work to pay it forward. They pursued careers in social work, counselling, and hope to teach and make higher education a more inclusive space.

This type of support SEFC offer highlights a major service gap at Texas State University. The narratives told by SEFC point to a service gap in emotional labor. By choosing majors like social work and counselling, students who are already marginalized and experiencing various levels of anxiety and depression are putting themselves in positions where mental health issues become exacerbated. With the trauma and mental health issues that come with surviving the foster care system, such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, it is no small feat for SEFC to pursue a higher education (Morton, 2018). By choosing majors in fields like social work and counselling, students like Mari and Sarah voice the negative impact their classes have had on their mental health. Class discussions about abuse and neglect tend to exacerbate mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

It is difficult for many of the SEFC I spoke with to balance their desire to help other SEFC and still being able to succeed in college. The narratives these students shared with me show a major gap in the current programs and services provided at Texas State University. Texas State University could benefit to having a program for professors and faculty where they can receive a training on trauma informed care. In this sense, the pressure SEFC face to help others would be less stressful if more faculty and professors were available in terms of emotional support as well. In these examples, SEFC channel their feelings of anger and resentment from living in the foster care system as a motivating force to pursue social justice fields.

Many of the SEFC I interviewed discuss how they are constantly surviving—surviving school, surviving through setbacks and anger at their families. Many of them spoke of their setbacks as a motivating source to help other SEFC by choosing majors like social work, counselling, and volunteering at events that cater to foster youth. Social theorist Christina Scharff explains “When positive attitudes are valued at the expense of anger or despair, critique, and the impetus to change something other than the self-have little use-value” (Scharff 113; 2016). SEFC are in some sense taking on this neoliberal self (Scharff 2016) by focusing on what they can do to help SEFC rather than looking at the socio-political institutions that cause the pain and suffering SEFC face. I use this article as a theoretical lens to understand how feelings of anger and distress can be redirected from personal responsibility to holding institutions accountable for the systems that continue to hurt and break people. In the narratives SEFC have shared with me, “Empowerment is thus framed as an individual endeavor and wider socio-political issues remain unaddressed” (Scharff 2016, 114).

Conversations about Abuse

Sarah spoke in depth about the toll her social work classes took on her mental health. I have stayed in contact with Sarah, and she recently informed me that she dropped out because she could no longer handle the stress. While attending one of her social work classes, a discussion about abuse led her to dropping out of a course. The professor asked the students if they had ever been spanked by their parents and what their parents used to hit them. The students in the class took turns sharing whether they were spanked and with what. When it came to Sarah, she discussed how she was physically abused by her father with a fan belt. When Sarah's professor asked if any of the students in the class have ever experienced abuse, she felt extremely uncomfortable to the point

where she started crying and felt embarrassed discussing her abuse in class. While retelling this experience to me, Sarah was tearing up just thinking about it.

By having to discuss her abuse in the classroom, she started to experience flashbacks of the abuse she endured when she was hit by her father. I asked Sarah what her plans were, and she says she hopes to transfer to another university but had to leave because she could no longer afford to go to Texas State University. She explained that when she turned 21, she was kicked out of the Supervised Independent Living Program and needed to find somewhere else to live. These examples serve to show why a tuition and fee waiver is not necessarily enough for equity—especially with the rising cost of living and increase in predatory student housing.

Like Sarah, Mari also felt extremely uncomfortable when discussing childhood abuse in class. She felt as though everybody in her class hypothetically engaged in conversations of abuse while she had a visceral experience with abuse. The traumatic background of living in abusive family situations made discussing abuse difficult and embarrassing. In her introductory philosophy class, she recalls how she had to write a ten-page paper on the topic of abuse and was fearful that she would have to share it in class. This anxiety Mari felt regarding classroom discussions and assignments on abuse came from her acknowledgement that she was not able to have a hypothetical conversation about her abuse like her peers because her experience with abuse was not an imaginary one. I asked Mari a follow up question to explain how she felt about this experience, and she told me,

I just didn't want the people in class to see me differently. When I was younger, everyone I went to school with found out [that she was in CPS] and would say things like oh you're the foster kid or treat me differently. And I remember wanting everyone to think I was normal. I just wanted it to seem like I just had a

normal childhood.

These stories show that having to discuss abuse in class and other sensitive topics are extreme barriers SEFC face when attending class and completing assignments. This helps to conceptualize why SEFC have lower GPA's and tend to drop out more frequently compared to their non-SEFC peers.

Feeling Isolated

Other challenges SEFC faced in their academic journeys were lack of familial support and feeling isolated in their classes and experiences. I interviewed a student named Julia over the phone as she lives in Mexico. She dropped out with one semester left in her master's degree because she did not have much family support. When asked about how her classes are going, Julia said that she dropped out of the graduate school counseling program with only one semester left. Factors that led Julia to want to leave Texas State University included her wanting to go to Mexico to be with her biological family whom she had recently reconnected with. As she explains "I have family in Mexico, and I have no familial support system in the US. So, it was a big motivator to want to be closer to them." This example shows how the mental health stressors Julia faced made it so that she was not able to see the value of obtaining a master's degree. She also discusses her professor telling her that she had too much trauma to be a counselor. I followed up asking if there were any supports or services that would have helped her stay enrolled at Texas State and she said that:

I did a counseling master's degree, and we had to do a lot of personal discussion questions in class. That was tough because the questions were meant to kind of push us to our boundaries of personal discussion and meant to be tools of self-growth. But it was hard because I also think the demographics of the other individuals in the counseling program made it difficult for me to finish because of the nature of the program and how we do have to practice counsel with each other. We also do a whole year of internship unpaid and most of the people in my

cohort come from really privileged backgrounds. I was a minority in my experiences in most everything. So, talking about sensitive topics with that demographic and then also with a bunch of counselors in the room with us was just difficult. For example, it was kind of funny because I kind of just got to the point in my master's program where if we had to do sharing, I just started self-disclosing. I started to own it [her background] and say hey, I'm going to share something that is going to be triggering for me, but it's part of the class and I want to share it because part of our curriculum is to be open and honest and it might be triggering for some of y'all in this room as well, but I think it's great practice since we're all practicing to be mental health counselors, not just for myself but for my colleagues as well. And I would just break the ice like that. And like I would get like weird looks and people would be like why are you sharing that like oh my god you know.

There were multiple intersectional barriers Julia faced that led to her leaving the program. Not only was she uncomfortable discussing her traumatic background in the foster care system, but it was also compounded with being surrounded by a cohort that came from privileged backgrounds. Through her experience in classes, she felt ostracized by the lack of diversity of experiences in her cohort and the classist structure of the counselling program. Later, Julia told me multiple stories that also shaped her decision to drop out of Texas State University. Her foster family was extremely conservative and stopped talking to her when she came out as gay. Even more, her professor who she respected and was excited to be mentored by, told her that she had too much trauma to be a counselor. When Julia was facing these circumstances, she explained how Dr. Norton, the foster care liaison at Texas State University helped her figure out whether she should stay and finish her degree. Like other students, Dr. Norton plays a major role in helping SEFC and giving her support. Further, like Monique, a lack of diversity and inclusivity in her cohort made her feel uncomfortable sharing in class about trauma. All these factors show the multiple challenges that impede on SEFC's success rates at Texas State University. Relating back to Scharff, this example shows how Julia's feeling of anger and distress within the counselling program made her want to drop

out. Feeling of anger and frustration are often reframed by SEFC to be reflections of problems within themselves rather than the socio-political systems in which they inhabit.

Navigating Office Hours

When asking SEFC the open-ended question regarding whether they utilize office hours, many students voiced feelings of shame and survivalist self-reliance in navigating the prospect of office hours (Samuels & Pryce 2008). One student Sarah mentioned how it made her feel very anxious to go to her professor's office hours. When I asked if she had any examples, she recalled her experience going to her history professor's office hours, which is a class she ended up dropping out of:

I even tried going to her [History professor] office hours. And she was like, you need to memorize all of this because I'm not going to tell you which ones, I'm putting on the test. I just felt like I came to her office hours for nothing. And even like trying to find her office, I got lost. And I was just like it would have been nice of her to give like some beneficial information, especially considering I got lost over there. And I was also feeling like I don't want to ask anyone for help. Because I don't want them to look at me. So, I was just walking around trying to find it, and trying not to look like I'm lost. I don't want these people to stop me and be like, do you need help? And I ended up asking my FACES advisor to help me.

Sarah is describing an experience where she tried to ask her professor for help and had to navigate many barriers even before got to her professor's office. Again, SEFC struggle with not wanting to be perceived of asking for help for fear of being judged for their status as an SEFC. These barriers include—not knowing where the professor's office was, not wanting to ask for help, and when she arrived at office hours—feeling like her professor did not want to help her. While discussing her experience attending office hours, Sarah described survivalist self-reliance (2008). She was resistant to ask for help due to not wanting to feel vulnerable and not wanting people to perceive her as lost. Like

Sarah, Mari also was nervous to go to her professor's office hours for help. When I asked about how she felt going to office hours, she told me:

For me, it was hard to ask for help, because I do everything by myself. So, it was hard to do that whenever I was not doing as good as I thought I would be [in class]. So, I would go to the professor's office but only on occasion, and even then, I was so nervous, I just did not want to go, and they can be the sweetest professors ever and I still wouldn't want to go because it just felt like to me like I was asking for help. And for some reason, when I was younger, I just didn't ask for that. So now doing it again [not asking for help], it was like why I should ask for help when I could do this myself even though I know I can't.

Despite knowing she needed help, her past experiences of learning how to be self-reliant prevented her from reaching out. I asked Mari a follow up question, "Why did you feel so uncomfortable asking for help when you were younger?" She replied telling me, "Just because honestly, like I was the oldest out of most of my foster siblings. So, they would ask me for help, and I would always do everything for them. I just never really asked for help."

In these examples, Sarah and Mari's feelings of independence and self-reliance have impeded their ability to ask for help. Mari discussed feeling that as a young adult she felt primarily responsible for her siblings and took on the role as a direct care provider. This sense of self-reliance Mari feels can serve as a source of both resilience and risk. While this type of self-reliance helped Mari navigate the foster care system and help her younger siblings, it can create complex challenges and exacerbate her struggles when navigating office hours (Pryce 2017). Further, SEFC have a social capital problem: they are unlikely to have family and social connections that can help them and promote them. They also have a cultural capital problem. They may know a lot about the culture of the foster care system and what it takes to survive this system, but that knowledge isn't valued by people outside of that system as classrooms are structured when facilitating

discussions surrounding abuse (Bourdieu 1990).

IV. OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Dr. Christine Norton, Dr. Toni Watt and FACES have been influential contributors to the success of the SEFC I spoke with. Dr. Norton is a licensed social work professor and the foster care liaison officer at Texas State University. She is an advocate, a mentor and tremendous supporter of the SEFC that attend Texas State University. Dr. Norton commits to helping SEFC navigate college by reaching out while they are still in Highschool. Every student I spoke with mentioned how much Dr. Norton had impacted their lives in positive way. Dr. Norton and Dr. Watt created the FACES program to help SEFC navigate the journey of college, feel the support of a community, and provide invaluable resources. Both Christine Norton and Toni Watt were mentioned in the interviews I had with SEFC as supportive and caring mentors who helped them graduate.

I asked SEFC to tell me about their first experiences going to FACES. Sarah, The Vice President of FACES at the time explained enthusiastically about the support she had received. Sarah replied saying:

I'm the vice president. I love it. I heard about FACES my freshman year, I got an email, and they invited me to the welcome luncheon, and I immediately felt a sense of belonging, and when you come from a background of being in foster care and you step foot on campus, and you're by yourself, you feel alone, you feel like, you won't relate to everyone else. And when I went into the FACES luncheon, I felt like I belonged, like I was understood. I wasn't the only one who struggled, and we all had tragic experiences that shaped us into who we are now, and I loved that and that we were able to turn our pain and everything into being productive members and going to college, trying to make something of ourselves, trying to break cycles that were taught to us.

When going to the first FACES event, she immediately felt like she belonged and that she had a community in which she felt safe being herself. This story serves to highlight how important FACES is to the SEFC community at Texas State University and how necessary it is to have a sense of belonging for any student. This especially rings true for

SEFC who have few adults or family members in their life they can turn to. Six out of the nine students I spoke with mentioned Dr. Norton reaching out to them while they were still in high school and helping them through navigating processes such as the FASFA application, finding housing, signing up for courses, providing resources in the form of textbooks, Gift cards, and pantry food. Another student I interviewed, Julia, spoke of the tremendous support Dr. Norton provided her support when making a huge life decision such as moving states and dropping out of college.

I spoke about this exact topic with Dr. Norton, before I moved, she was fabulous. And I've always been apprehensive to open about me and my background, because it's my personal business, but Dr. Norton is so good at breaking down those barriers and walls. I come and talk to her about stuff that, you know, she's kind of like a sounding board for me when making these big personal decisions so I really can't think of anything else Texas State or FACES could have done because I talked to Dr. Norton about it because I was making such a big decision with my career and my life. She helped me process, all of this out and like I was saying to her, well, Dr. Norton I have family in Mexico, and I have no familial support system in the US. So, it was a big motivator to want to be closer to them.

In Julia's case, Dr. Norton helped her make a monumental decision about her academic career and life in general. Despite her feelings of wanting to be self-reliant and being used to putting up walls in her personal life, Dr. Norton allowed her to feel safe coming to her with big, life altering decisions.

Nevertheless, some students were hesitant to reach out to Dr. Norton due to past experiences they had reaching out to adults while in the foster care system and feelings of fear that they may overwhelm her. One student I spoke with, Mari, felt like she did not want to overwhelm Dr. Norton because she felt like Dr. Norton had so many students she worked with, and she did not want to burden her. This held her back from asking for mental health support. When I asked about this hesitance to reach out for mental health support, she told me:

I guess there was a barrier when it came to reaching out for mental health support, even with FACES, even throughout like my whole time in Texas State. I just didn't really know to what extent we should use each other or Dr. Norton as a mental health support system. And there was kind of this aspect of like I know Dr. Norton has like, you know however many different former foster youths that are probably utilizing her so that whole big mental process of like my problems probably aren't that important compared to everyone else's, you know, thinking that that was probably the biggest thing that held me back from wanting to reach out for mental health support.

Mari's reluctance to reach out to Dr. Norton stemmed from her fear of feeling like her difficulties were not as important or stressful as other students. More than that, she was having difficulties negotiating the boundaries of asking for help. While living in the foster care system and especially in institutionalized settings it is necessary to be self-reliant (Samuels and Pryce 2008). Case workers and foster parents are constantly overworked with few resources and YEFC learn that if you need something, whether it be food, clothes, or emotional support, you are responsible for obtaining these resources.

When translating this mode of behavior into the academic realm, it is difficult for SEFC to ask for help because they assume that they are responsible for obtaining their own resources. Mari explains that when she was living with her foster family, she was the oldest of her siblings and tried not to burden her foster parents for fear of looking "weak" to her siblings and wanting to stay in her placement. Many other SEFC discussed wanting to hide their experiences for fear of being perceived as an "other" in the dominant culture of academic institutions.

This type of mentality of comparing oneself and struggles to others inhibited Mari from getting the mental health support she needed. Nevertheless, she decided to give FACES a try and spoke about all the tremendous support and care Dr. Norton showed her. At the time of our interview, she told me that she was recently elected to be President of FACES and is an active member.

Giddens (1986) breaks down in “The Constitution of Society” the structure-agency analysis or what he calls structuration. Although SEFC are operating under structures that marginalize them, they still have agency. While there are institutions that form and reproduce patterns of navigation, agency is still exercised in some capacity by SEFC as shown in this example with Mari’s choice to trust Dr. Norton and her eventual promotion to president of FACES. In these examples, when reaching out for help from campus support programs the barriers are extensive. When navigating campus support programs, students worry about feelings of rejection. Feeling like asking for help can be a detriment to their self-worth and that they must compensate for service gaps in the institution of Texas State University. Despite this, students like Mari navigated and overcame these barriers.

V. OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

In this section, I aim to highlight the outcomes SEFC face while navigating their experiences in college. These outcomes include academic success stories, drop out stories, and what has helped SEFC persevere in the adversity they face. Through these narratives, the SEFC I spoke with discuss with me how they negotiated the challenges they faced while attending Texas State University.

Academic Success Stories

Many of the students I interviewed highlighted their academic successes, expressing pride in their accomplishments and resilience when navigating school. Monique started off by telling me “I’m going to talk about a period of time where oppression led to success.” This was a story about her academic success and how that impacted how she sees herself and her positionality in Texas State University. During her first semester, she was enrolled in College Writing 1310 (ENG 1310). She was excited and enthusiastic to learn and participate in class. Monique recalls wanting to “be a damn nerd” in this class and really put herself out there.

One day, she was in class, and they were talking about the readings. Monique described a white male student in the class as “arrogant”, who I call Steve (Pseudonym). Monique recalls this story in our interview as a time where she felt academically successful while she was enrolled in College Writing 1310 (ENG 1310) in her first semester at Texas State University in 2016. In her mind, he did not seem to care about the readings or put much effort into class. She raised her hand because she thought he was finished talking and “he snapped at me,” saying “don’t interrupt me when I’m talking.” Monique said that, “As he continued to ramble on about readings, I put my hand down

and remember asking myself what I want to do about that?” In this example, Monique is describing the multiple intersectional barriers she faces on a day-to-day basis. Sociologist Kimberle Crenshaw discusses how this type of routine violence committed on Black woman’s bodies shapes their lives in multiple ways (Crenshaw 1991). Crenshaw explains how “conversations surrounding race and gender are treated in liberal discourse as intrinsically negative frameworks in which power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (Crenshaw, 1991; 1241). Monique tells me how defeated and disappointed she felt walking out of class that day. This was during 2016, when she as a Black woman who is also an SEFC voiced that she was scared knowing that white supremacists were on campus and the Donald Trump election was going on. As she explained “the white people were showing out, to like, an extreme.” Everybody in the class was “shook” because she usually comes to class excited, and talkative.

Her professor emailed her later that day formally apologizing for the behavior of the student and wanting to assure her that he wants everyone’s voice to be heard in his classes and that the behavior of that student was a microaggression and form of oppression. Steve apologized to Monique for cutting her off to say something that he deemed “wasn’t thoughtful.” Monique took this chance to tell Steve that what bothered her was not that what he said wasn’t thoughtful, but that they were going over literature where they were talking about “minority rhetoric and voices” and “because he has not been through experiences of ethnic marginalization nor was reading the literature, he could not empathize or speak on those experiences.” After this story, I could hear Monique’s voice start to tremble. She told me:

Like, because my thing is, you're not gonna make me look like an idiot when I put in twice as much work as you have already as a person. So, I feel like that long

story short, that is probably the most empowered I felt or most successful I felt within my academic career. Like conquering the oppression, conquering the silence. So, I was like, we're gonna find some voices being heard today. All the repression as a Black woman, my intersectionality was just disrespected. You know and as a Black woman, being brave enough to step up to an oppressor, and I'm not saying like, you know, slavery oppression or like that kind of thing but I am talking about academic oppression like that's very difficult stepping up to a person who has no idea about the experience of what Black women go through, but you want to speak about it for 10 minutes? You're not gonna make me look like a damn clown so I was not gonna have that. Not only did I make it powerful, but I'm making sure it's counted for because honestly, Kayli, there are so many undocumented moments of microaggressions, there are so many undocumented moments of oppression and racism and misogynistic views and you know, hierarchal and patriarchal views that disrespect women, disrespect feminism, disrespect the black community disrespect, you know, LGBTQ plus communities.

In Monique's narrative, she discusses that success for her is making visible the silence and marginalization she experiences on a day-to-day basis. In Monique's experience, academic success came out of standing up to a student in her class who made her feel inadequate. This type of academic success story is not typical. It shows the various levels of oppression Monique had to face in her first semester at Texas State University and how she was resilient in this situation. She goes on to discuss how many microaggressions and challenges BIPOC, LGBTQ+, First-Generation and SEFC face that are often not documented. By her professor documenting and apologizing for this moment as well as being able to tell Steve in what ways he had made her feel marginalized, she was able to tell a story about her academic success. This story shows that with everyone documented, recognized moment of marginalization or microaggressions, there are many more that go undocumented. The moments where students experience these challenges and they are not addressed can lead to students wanting to drop out, feeling insecure, and having imposter syndrome. Further, Monique goes on to describe why these types of undocumented microaggressions can hurt so much. She went on to explain:

There are so many undocumented moments even in this space that were supposed to be one and unified [the university]. When we take the word University, UNI means like one function, one body that is versatile. So, it's like a unified front, essentially, that we're supposed to be claiming ourselves to be in. But what the statistics say of more white people enrolling and dominating the Latinx community here on campus, and there's just a small percentage of you know, Black people who come to college and then don't even finish or must transfer out because it's so expensive, when we have communities such as like, FACES or LGBTQIA plus communities here on campus, those are not being represented. So how are we university? If we're not versatile enough? And we're not feeling like a unified front? I'm just saying, like, that makes people feel less than and it makes people feel like they don't have a voice in their academic success. Because they must worry about peers judging them, like judging the way that they live their life and I feel like as a Black woman, I'm constantly in competition, even though that's one thing that we talked about in the master's program with communication studies is like, Hey, we're all here for the same thing. This is a collective, we're a team, we're not going against each other. But because of the way that my life is set up I feel like I've constantly had to show myself and like do twice as much work as you know, my white counterparts and the people who do not know what it is like to go through the foster care system.

This powerful narrative highlights the type of cognitive dissonance Monique has when thinking about her positionality at Texas State University versus the narrative that has been disseminated to her in class about the university being a “unified front”.

Monique explains that in her communication class, they discuss how everyone has the common mission to learn and grow and are considered unified front. However, in Monique's experience, she has had to work through multiple levels of oppression to have a voice in her academic success and fight for the right to live in her own body without her peers judging her. Donna Haraway discusses in her work “situated knowledges” that all knowledge is embodied and partial (1988). Monique is struggling to express herself from her own embodied knowledge. Being surrounded by peers who are predominantly White and have never been in the foster care system makes her feel like she must try twice as hard to be seen and heard in her own body.

Young explains how “the dominant culture's stereotyped, marked, and interiorized

images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the degree that they are forced to react to behaviors of others that express or are influenced by those images” (Young, 1990: 286). When Monique discusses not wanting to be judged by her peers and feeling like she is in constant competition with them she is referencing the five faces of oppression that Young expands on. Monique explains wanting her knowledge and experiences to be validated in the same way that her peer’s embodied perspectives. Young discusses how one of the five faces of oppression is marginalization. This occurs when students like Monique feel as though they are having to adapt to the dominant group’s perceptions of her body, knowledge, and ways of navigating life. For SEFC this is amplified. In Monique’s case, when this oppression was recognized, she discussed how this defines academic success for her. However, in Julia’s case, the internalized fear and judgment she felt from her professor and cohort was an academic barrier that led her to drop out. In these narratives, there are multiple barriers SEFC navigate while in college, and that these barriers are nuanced, visceral and contribute to our understanding in how SEFC navigate college.

Academic Drop Out Stories

One of the main challenges SEFC face when attending Texas State University is having to drop out of classes. It is imperative for faculty and staff to have trauma informed care classes to understand what at- risk SEFC need to be successful in college. In these drop out stories, I show how SEFC negotiate their decisions to drop out and what effect this has on their academic success. Most SEFC who attend universities are often struggling with emotional, psychological, and physical barriers more intensely than the average college student (Silva 2012). Two out the nine students I interviewed dropped out of school entirely. Many students expressed that despite having a tuition and fee

waiver they were still struggling to make ends meet. This often led to students dropping out of multiple classes and failing others. This lack of funding coupled with a lack of family support made many SEFC feel like their only option was to drop out. Monique stressed how important it was for her to have funding especially at the master's level. Like other students Monique also spoke of this feeling that she was being forgotten. Like Sarah who felt forgotten or abandoned by the State, Monique felt like when she finally worked hard enough to get to the master's level, she had to take out a 20,000-dollar loan which left her devastated. As she explains:

I will say that funding is just essential because I know from my past experiences what it's like to go without essential things such as a house, eviction sucks. If I'm not paying between the first and the third, that's the issue regardless of school. Funding for just our community in specific I feel like would just increase our percentage rate because along with other necessities such as transportation and where to stay because the logistics of all of that I think that is another driving force that prevents like our community from being able to even come to college or continue. Me as a person at the master's level, I think that we just kind of get forgotten about. CPS is like wait until the child is 18 and then they come in and push that child off. That's what it feels like for the transition for between undergraduate to graduate, because we are so caught on in our undergrad and they really give you all these money opportunities but for people who have first generation parents, and on top of that first-generation adoptive parents who have adopted multiple children at once, there's only so much that they could do, right? I thought I had enough now, but I don't you know, so it's just things creep up on you and it's stressful.

For Monique, having a background where she has been evicted before makes her feel as though her house and livelihood could be taken from her at any moment, preventing her from focusing on schoolwork. In this case, Monique's agency, and ability to prioritize class work is threatened by her constant worry about basic needs such as housing food and shelter. She also mentions that as a master's student she feels like she's been "forgotten about." Monique speaks about having to take out a loan and feeling forgotten about by the State as some of the more extreme obstacles she has had to face being at

Texas State University. She compares the transition for undergraduate to graduate as the equivalent of being kicked out of your parents' house. In this case, the State of Texas becomes synonymous for parents. The money she received in her undergraduate career allowed her to continue to think school was a secure safety net that she could continue to pursue but this changed when she had to take out loans as a graduate student. Having been evicted before and experienced trauma in this way Monique's ability to fund her education and rent feel like pressing issues. Not having a family that can support her if she falls, getting a degree becomes so much more important. She expressed being worried that she would have to take more out or that she may never be able to pay it back. She felt that taking out a loan elicited a trauma response in the same way a life-or-death issue may.

Sarah also mentioned how she dropped out of three of her classes because of an abusive relationship she was in with her boyfriend. As I have stayed in touch with Sarah, she informed me that she dropped out of college altogether shortly after our interview because she was kicked out of the SIL program and could no longer handle the stress.

When I asked what led her to drop out of her courses, she replied that:

I dropped biology last semester and I had dropped US literature and technical writing. Last semester, I dropped all those classes because I was in a bad relationship. Last year I was in a toxic relationship just like my mother was in and the guy was abusive, mentally, physically, and emotionally. We've known each other since we were little we lived in a shelter [foster home shelter] together. So, I had that same hope that my mom has about my dad, that he'll change. So, I put up with it for a lot. And then, I didn't realize like until we broke up how much money I had spent on him. And I lost a lot of money on him. And then I realized I need a job. Yeah. I didn't know how I was going to be able to get out alive while juggling five classes plus working full time. And one of my classes was my Social Work class where I had to go volunteer in San Antonio with the CPS office. So that's why I had to cut those three classes out. And then I dropped them. And I was like, okay, well what's gonna happen, and they were just like, you just got to take it again, it doesn't affect your GPA, you're fine. So, I am now retaking two of

those classes. And I am still juggling the part time job.

Sarah was in an abusive relationship, juggling work and school which resulted in her having to drop three of her classes. Further, she was told by one of her professors that it is okay to drop because it does not affect her GPA. What her professor did not tell her was the consequences of dropping multiple classes. Dropping classes can make it very difficult to graduate on time and there is a limit to how many classes you can drop. Sarah mentioned how she tended to prioritize her abusive relationship over her school and work, which was a behavior she learned from her biological mother prior to being placed in CPS. While quantitative data can tell us how often SEFC drop classes and what their GPAs are, this story exemplifies how SEFC navigate these difficult decisions and challenges while attending college. For Sarah, she was choosing to volunteer at the CPS office in San Antonio and spending all her money on her abusive boyfriend she had known since she was a child. Despite wanting to help other SEFC and do well in school, Sarah was entrapped in situations that limited her agency and ability to succeed. Further another barrier she faced was having to learn time management skills. As she explains:

Balancing being a full-time student and working part time, that is challenging. I know during finals week, I guess like it slipped my mind that I had a biology final on Monday. And I told my boss, I could work on Monday and then I had to call him, and I was like, I'm so sorry. I know, I said I could come in, but I can't I have a final. And I didn't realize how, you know how easy it was for me to miss something. And I was like, I'm so glad I caught on to that, especially you're considering it was a final. And I'm so just trying, you know, I'm still struggling with you know, trying to find that balance of work and school. And the only reason I work really is because at 21 and I'm about to age out of the program and I have to pay for my apartment by myself.

At the time of our interview, Sarah was in extended foster care in a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) Program. This program will end for her when she turns twenty-one years old, so she is working hard to save for when she ages out of extended foster

care. This housing situation has been stressful and has affected her time management skills when balancing school and work. She expressed to me how she was anxious trying to make ends meet because she must focus on having enough money to have a safety net for when she must leave the SIL program. Further, the SIL program has very strict curfew, visitor, and cleanliness rules. Sarah spoke about the SIL program inhibiting her from feeling like “a real adult” but it is also necessary for her to meet her housing needs. These examples serve to highlight the limited agency Sarah has while navigating the SIL program, working part time and being a full-time student. In Sarah’s narrative, she describes how her fear of leaving the SIL program prevents her from focusing her energy on maintaining her GPA and being academically successful.

Further, another student Leslie, spoke of being tired of applying for resources from the State and really lacking a sense of community which made her consider dropping out many times. She told me:

I feel like having a lack of a support system, whether that's just emotional support or financial support. Those were my two biggest areas of concern when I was an undergraduate and led me to almost drop out. I think that I should just drop out when any type of credit crisis happens and of course FACES is there and there's a lot of aged out foster youth resources that can help you financially but after a while, it gets tedious to always have to apply for money, and then have to have a receipt for everything and keep track of how you spent it and all of these different things when maybe I just want to go watch a movie or something and I don't want to have to explain why I spent money on watching a movie rather than getting gas for my car or something like that, so I kind of stopped asking for resources from the State in general. And because of I feel more alone in my journey in life. But I think that it's one of those things that's just like, like no matter how much we talk about, like found family you either feel like you're alone or you don't. Whenever I talk to other foster youth, I feel like a lot of us just feel alone and having to detail all my receipts and stuff to strangers just makes me feel so much more alone.

For Leslie two of the biggest challenges, she faced were a lack of emotional and financial support. She was tired of having to fill out several bureaucratic pieces of paper and having to keep up with her receipts just so she could go and watch a movie occasionally

with friends. This example goes to show that there is much more nuance in the challenges SEFC face despite having resources or statistics that quantify the resources SEFC have. Like the tuition waiver examples, Leslie explains her struggle navigating bureaucratic rules and paperwork. For someone who has a nuclear family to rely on, asking for a few dollars from family typically does not require signatures, receipts, proof of income, etc.

For SEFC, this is a day-to-day struggle when trying to finish a degree and still be able to enjoy oneself and live. There is a difference between surviving and living. For Leslie, it was difficult being forced to justify and negotiate with strangers because she decided to go out to see a movie with friends versus paying for gas. This type of negotiation can be exemplified through Foucault's lens of docile bodies (Foucault 1979). The State demands that SEFC describe and justify what makes them worthy of extra money and how they prioritize the spending of State money. For Leslie, this type of documentation made her feel alone because she had to justify why she spent her money and time on hanging out with friends. Foucault explains how one of the characteristics of the privileged is to decide who has the right to live or die (Foucault Reader 1984). In this case, the State feels entitled to know every aspect of the lives of SEFC because they provide them money. They also feel entitled to make SEFC justify what they can and cannot spend their money on.

For Leslie, the paperwork that goes into receiving \$50 made her feel lonely and eventually led her to stop asking for money from the State and other organizations that allocate money to aged out foster youth. Similarly, Leslie also expressed her experience with damaging and abusive relationships and how this led her to drop out:

I dropped out of two courses the Summer of 2019. This was my first semester back in Texas after being in New York. I was in a violent relationship which is

super ironic for what I was doing at the time [she was doing an internship at a domestic violence shelter]. I felt isolated, and I didn't really feel like I had a grip on school or work. I've always had to work full time hours. I was an assistant manager at the time at a restaurant. So, I was hitting like 60 to 80 hours a week. And taking a full course load just wasn't something that I could do while affording an apartment and my car and everything like that. So, I just decided at that point work was more important to school. And yeah, so I dropped a couple of classes.

Leslie describes not only having to maintain schoolwork but also working 60 to 80 hours a week, but also navigating an abusive relationship . Like other SEFC the barriers she faced were a culmination of obstacles that led to her drop out. Further, she was also interning at a battered womxn's shelter which only exacerbated the shame she felt while being in an abusive relationship. SEFC drop out at a high rate and tend to think of schoolwork as secondary when it comes to being able to get their basic needs met. Like Julia, emotional and physical support are necessary for SEFC to have if they are going to be successful in college.

Participant Observation at FACES Meetings

I attended approximately three FACES meetings throughout the Fall semester of 2021. Approximately four to five students attended these meetings along with Dr. Christine Norton. I participated as an SEFC myself during these meetings as we planned events and checked in on one another. For two of these meetings, I attended via Zoom, and I attended one in person. Each meeting we started off discussing “highs” and “lows” of our week. For highs we would discuss aspects of our lives that made us happy, moments of success, and what we were looking forward to. For lows, we would discuss aspects of life we were struggling with, events that were heavy on our minds and other stressors and challenges we were facing. Many students expressed highs in the form of announcing the gender reveal parties of their children, looking forward to graduating, and

getting jobs. Lows consisted of being anxious about finding a guarantor for housing, having biological family members reach out during stressful times, and having to support family members. After we all discussed our highs and lows, Dr. Norton would plan events such as going to University Camp, and hosting campus tours for potential incoming SEFC freshman. For in person meetings, Dr. Norton would bring snacks and other resources such as backpacks and school supplies. These meetings allowed me to see how SEFC interact and discuss in a less formal setting in comparison to an interview. Through these meetings, SEFC build community and closer relationships with one another and Dr. Norton. These meetings allowed me to realize how valuable it is for SEFC to have a safe space in which they are surrounded by other SEFC that experience similar trauma, successes, and experiences. Further, many SEFC discussed a problem that I have not seen discussed in previous literature but is a serious issue many SEFC face.

When having to navigate housing, a huge challenge SEFC face is having to find a guarantor. A guarantor is a person that agrees to sign a lease with somebody who does not make enough money to pay for an apartment themselves. Many SEFC spoke about the challenges they face trying to find housing with no guarantor. Student housing in San Marcos, Texas is particularly predatory, as many SEFC rent rooms in a house or apartment where they are forced to sign an individual lease and therefore there has to be a guarantor for every single lease in the house or apartment. This is a particularly damaging legislation as SEFC who are rooming with friends or partners who have guarantors cannot rely on their roommates guarantors. This is a huge but often invisible problem SEFC face when attending college and trying to find housing. There is virtually no housing agency or apartment complex that offers housing to SEFC without a guarantor.

While students who have family members can typically rely on them to serve as a guarantor, SEFC do not have this same privilege. When I went to FACES meetings, I spoke with a SEFC who needed a guarantor, and I told them about the low-income housing properties I lived in and how to get around this stipulation. It typically involves having to save at least five times the first month's rent and having to pay more for a security deposit. This type of work around for not having a guarantor is usually only offered at low-income housing and apartments and is very difficult to find. Further, it is also very difficult to save this amount of money when many SEFC have little to no savings. Overall, these meetings provided me with a more nuanced informal view of how SEFC navigate their academic successes and barriers while attending Texas State University.

VI. DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

For students who have experienced foster care, you are never not a “foster kid.” This cultural identity becomes a part of you, and it is imperative that children who grow up in institutionalized care settings have all the tools they need to be successful. The SEFC I spoke with consistently turn their challenges into triumphs. In this work, I illustrate how SEFC navigate challenges at Texas State University and how they overcome these challenges. Throughout this research, I have aimed to give a contextual, nuanced perspective that adds to the predominantly quantitative research about SEFC. It is important to hear the narratives of foster youth because administrators, faculty and professors can develop new modes of support when taking their experiences into account. SEFC have adapted the habits and knowledge they learned in the foster care system in creative ways while attending Texas State University. Throughout these interviews, the SEFC I collaborated with led me to understand the nuanced and complex ways they navigate admissions, challenges, and mental health. For the SEFC I spoke with, feelings of rejection, bad grades, having to talk about abuse in class as well as many other challenges bring about feelings of shame, guilt, and rejection. For traditional emerging adults, college is a fun time to explore one’s sense of self in the world (Arnett 2000). For SEFC, college feels like a security net that is so fragile that it can be taken away at any moment. In this sense a failing grade is not just a failing grade. Dropping a class is not just a minor inconvenience. Discussions about abuse and trauma in class are not just philosophical abstract concepts. The guilt of surviving the foster care system and not being able to bring siblings and other foster youth motivated many of the SEFC I interviewed to choose majors like social work and counselling. However, this took a huge

toll on their mental and physical health leading two of the students I spoke with to drop out.

Based on my research findings, more support and funding are needed for SEFC at Texas State University. I suggest that there needs to be more streamlined and funded trauma informed care training for faculty at Texas State University. Faculty need to know how to triage traumatized SEFC students in crisis and how to make space for students that are not comfortable rehashing their trauma. Dr. Christine Norton and Terrance Parker work with the Bobcat Justice Education Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) program in providing trauma informed care training to faculty and staff that specifically focuses on the how to work with SEFC. However, information about this training is not very accessible or well known by faculty and staff at Texas State University and is entirely voluntary. Further, through my participation in the FACES Organization, Group Me, and Facebook, I learned that many SEFC need emergency housing, food, and water. Dr. Norton takes on much responsibility in this type of support and I suggest there should be a way in which other professors and faculty could volunteer as a support network for SEFC. Dr. Norton does so much for SEFC, but she is only one person. I suggest that information about the SEFC population needs to be more streamlined and readily available so that faculty and professors can understand the unique circumstances SEFC face and could volunteer to help SEFC in ways deemed appropriate.

Even more, many of the SEFC I spoke with had extensive troubles understanding the tuition and fee waiver. My second suggestion is that there needs to be more streamlined information about the tuition and fee waiver that has accessible language. This could be provided by Student Business Services in the form of a webinar or website.

Further, many SEFC must physically prove that they have a tuition and fee waiver to Student Business Services, and this can be embarrassing and humiliating to some of the SEFC I spoke with. I suggest that Student Business Services at Texas State University create a program where SEFC can submit their tuition waiver online or use their FASFA information as proof that SEFC were in the foster care system to make this process easier for both parties.

My third suggestion is for there to be more housing support for SEFC who do not have a guarantor. Many SEFC spoke about housing as a major stressor in their lives and this could be alleviated if there was an on-campus housing program that catered to the needs of SEFC specifically. This is particularly valuable for graduate students and upperclassmen who have different living needs than traditional freshman dormitories can provide. This type of support is vital for SEFC who experience housing insecurity.

The research that I conducted shows the nuanced experiences SEFC navigate before college, while they are attending college and what the outcomes of their college experiences are. While this research allows a very nuanced and intimate lens into the lives and challenges SEFC face, there are many limitations. First, my sample consisted of only nine students, and only one of those students identified as male. Second, this sample was only representative of SEFC who 18 were+ and did not represent students who were still in the foster care system and under the age of 18 years old. Despite the small sample size and lack of representation, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the experiences of SEFC and shows their experiences from their own perspectives. It also demonstrates the need for further study.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A: My Phenomenological Experience as an SEFC

As a SEFC myself, I struggled with many hurdles on my journey through higher education and well before I stepped foot onto Texas State University. I am positioning myself in this research not as native or objective but part of a collaboration to make higher education spaces more inclusive and supportive for students who have non-traditional backgrounds. I intend to examine my phenomenological experience attending high school when removed from my mother's custody by Child Protective Services (CPS) in the year 2013. I want to share this story because I want the reader to know why I care about this research and what propelled me to be in graduate school myself. In, "Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective", chapter four discusses how natural attitudes are modified phenomenologically depending on changes in perspective. Changes in perspective exist "in the context of engagement with social and physical worlds (Throop, 2015; 76)". Using my experience enrolling in Hondo high school the day after I was put in a foster home, I attempt to describe an experience in my life where my perspective of school and family was phenomenologically modified.

It was a normal Wednesday. I was studying for an AP Spanish four practice exam. My mom was inside smoking a cigarette, while my three siblings and I went about various activities in our after-school Wednesday evening natural attitudes. Throop describes a natural attitude as an "attitude in which we assume there to be an everyday world that exists independently of our experience of it (Throop, 2015: 75)". In my natural attitude, I was studying for class the next day, assuming I would be going to Tivy high school and sleeping in my own bed that night. In the moment, my attitude towards reality

focused on my engagement with my schoolwork and conjugating verbs. My brothers were playing video games and my little sister was watching them play. I operated as if there was an objective reality unchanged from my subjective experience of it.

A phenomenological modification in natural perspective occurs in various forms including experimental, a shift in attention, and suffering (Throop, 2015). Around 8 or 9pm multiple cops and two caseworkers showed up in the front of my yard. After a drawn-out back and forth between my mother and the cops, where she sat on the couch crying and reading the warrant out loud, the cops commanded my siblings and me to pack up as much of our belongings as we could. My siblings were sent to a foster home in Kerrville, the town where we were living at the time, but there was not enough room for me. Since I was the oldest, the caseworker separated me from my siblings and proceeded to drive me to a foster home in Hondo, Texas at around 10pm.

The next morning, I woke up to four girls in the room with me getting ready for school. I pretended to be asleep when the woman who ran the group home, Kim, asked me to wake up and get dressed to go to school. I was not tired, but I felt exhausted. I was listening to the girls around me trying not to breathe. I felt like I was a trespasser in their home, like I did not even belong to my own body. I felt like I was in a bad dream and that if I just held my breath for long enough, I would wake up in my own bed with my little sister next to me. In my natural state, living with my mom, I loved going to school. It was a chance to escape and put my all into learning. On this day, that was not the case. It felt surreal to be asked to go to school in a town I did not know, living with strangers.

Throop (2013) reports that the Yapese believe feeling compassion for someone who is suffering means having power over them. Kim expressed her compassion for me,

but still had the authority to make me go to school the day after being removed from my family. She proceeded to ask if I had any clothes, offered me food, and told me that she would help me in any way she could. To have compassion is a privilege. It is the privilege to recognize someone is suffering and offer them help and comfort that you do not necessarily need to be reciprocated. As explained by Throop, power is not always unidirectional. “The expression of suffering places an ethical demand upon those who witness it (Throop, 318).” As much as Kim was in a position of power over me, the suffering I was going through made her feel required to help me. To take me into her home, to offer me food, to tell me I was going to be okay.

While Kim talked to the registration desk enrolling me to school, I could not help but feel my body go utterly numb. The part of my brain that cares and wants to know what is going on shut off. I did not feel anything. I was not sad, I was not happy, I felt nothing. I went to the first period with one notebook and a pencil Kim handed me in the car. I asked the teacher if I could go to the bathroom and sat in there the entire day. I was experiencing “deeply felt strings of pain that do not start from you but come towards you from the object that is causing your pain. These strings bind you and pull you back toward that object or person (Throop, 2015; 83)”. All I could think about were the strings of pain: my mom, and my siblings. I was thinking about my little sister and how the cops and caseworkers made her leave her walker because it would not fit in their car. In the bathroom, I journaled about my plan to run away and find my family and get back to my home. Moments of pain and suffering are the times in which we truly understand how vulnerable we are, interrupting the natural attitude in which reality is a singular, objective entity, and instead understanding that existence is an infinite, everchanging, subjective

process that we often have no control over.

A limit experience occurs when you are violently shown that your day-to-day life is taken for granted (Throop, 2015). I was shown by CPS that my bodily agency, school, friends, and family were something I was taking for granted. When I received purple slips of paper every week asking me to go to the counselor's office while in class, I knew I would have to talk to a CPS worker. What I did not know is how much power they had to change my life. I always told them I was fine, that my mom and family were great. That did not stop them from investigating. It did not stop them from fundamentally changing my life. Living with Kim and in other foster homes changed the way I interacted and felt towards my mom. She has been homeless for years, and I no longer have a relationship with her anymore other than phone calls every couple of months that consists of word salad on her end and silence on mine. "Limit situations are used to make the taken-for-granted background of everyday life "show up," to become visible as foreground (Ram & Houston, 2015; 35)." This experience radically transformed my relationship to my body, my siblings, my mother, and school.

Hondo high school was no different than any other public high school in Texas, but my subjective experience attending school changed phenomenologically. School was now a traumatizing space in my mind, rather than somewhere I felt safe. AP tests and classes that used to mean so much to me did not matter at all. I cared only about my immediate survival and the survival of my siblings. As I continued to go to school, students were talking to me, but my body responded radically different. I went to a sixth period theatre elective, and a student asked me if I wanted to join in their play and be a technician in the theatre Black Box. I immediately started crying in front of the whole

class uncontrollably, not able to even move or see anything around me. Teachers were giving me homework that I threw away as soon as I got back to my new “home”. Every part of my body focused on how to get in contact with my family. My natural attitude consisted of using school to survive my family life. It was a source of happiness for me. The phenomenological experience of having been physically removed from the family I was surrounded with my entire life, modified not only how I perceived school, but how I perceived family.

Now that I am no longer in this situation, I often reflect on it with my siblings. We experienced a phenomenological shift in our everyday perspective together. When we talk amongst each other about living in foster care and group homes, our experience transcends pain and becomes validated. The pain we all endured was translated into care and support for one another. Each of us had a completely different experience, and yet it tied us together in a metaphysical way. “The sacred is not a thing”, but rather, a transformative experience (Throop, 2015; 84). The experience of being separated from my family is sacred in that it is an experience that belongs to us and can only be understood between us. My relationship to school, my family, even my own bodily agency changed entirely. I realized nothing is ever static or constant, but instead always doing and reacting. I understood, in a visceral way, that there were people who had the power to transform my life and physically remove me from everything I knew. I never imagined that the cops would threaten me with juvenile detention if I did not leave my mother’s house or that I would be visiting my mom, in a room, in front of a see-through screen, for our monthly visits. It made me feel sick, like I had betrayed her, as if I were no longer her daughter but a stranger in a room, being watched by strangers behind a

screen. As the caseworker drove me to Hondo, she stopped at a Sonic. I was violently crying, and she asked if I wanted anything to eat, as if it was just a regular day on the job. My life and my body felt unrecognizable. I no longer had the illusion of control over anything.

Despite the isolation and vulnerability, knowing that I had not actually alone got me through the foster care system. Relating to the experience of the Yapese, I felt the “pain of the village” (Throop, 2015; 82). The village was my mom, my siblings, and the thirty girls living with me. The girls that were living in Kim’s house with me were of all different backgrounds, ethnicities, and abilities. Some were survivors of sex-trafficking and sexual abuse from their parents, and some were 21 years old living in transitional care while going to college, sneaking me their phones so I could try to get in contact with my friends and family.

While foster care youth living in group homes and institutions are not building a village physically, we built love and endurance for our community and each other. Listening to the stories of the girls I was living with distracted me from my own pain. As Throop explains, attention to others pain and communal suffering becomes sacred in that it reveals the “singularity of our own and another’s being (Throop, 2015)”. My siblings and the girls I lived with changed the way I perceived my own grief. Had I not experienced living in a foster home, I never would have known the pain of being completely isolated from my family. I also never would have felt the love I have for my siblings in the same way and the girls I met living at Kim’s house, without phenomenological modification of my everyday experience.

This experience never truly left me. Being in foster care has transformed my

subjective, phenomenological experience of family and school. In hindsight, it was one of the most enduring, loving, heartfelt, traumatic, and painful experiences of my life. As Throop says, the phenomenological and natural attitudes do not exist separately.

Graduating out of the foster care system allowed me to go to a university, to become closer to my siblings, and to get away from the neglect and abuse I had experienced. I am now writing this thesis in hopes to help other foster care youth who are emancipated from the system. This phenomenological experience fundamentally changed my relationship to everything I perceive. School is now a transformative tool allowing me to survive and inspire others in ways I am still coming to realize.

APPENDIX B: Interview Question Guide

1. How has your summer been so far? What is your major? What are you studying for the Fall semester?
2. Tell me about your classes, are there classes you like more than others? Please explain?
3. What does academic success mean to you? How would you define it?
4. What factors led you to want to pursue college?
 - a. Are there any mentors in your life that helped you apply and enroll in college?
 - b. Can you give some examples on how they helped you? How did they help you?
 - c. Was college something you heard about often in your home before you came to Texas State University?
 - d. How did you feel about the process of enrolling?
5. Are you currently doing an internship?
6. How do you feel about going to professor's office hours?
7. Have you made any lasting connections with professors or faculty at Texas State University?
8. Are there any barriers you feel are in the way of successfully completing your degree?
9. Have you ever felt like dropping out of a course? If so, why?
10. How would you describe your time management skills?
11. Tell me about your study habits. For example, how do you prepare for exams?
12. Have you ever gone to office hours? Tell me about a time where you have gone to office hours?
13. Tell me about some of the challenges you have faced while trying to get your degree?
 - a. Can you give some examples?
14. Have you heard of FACES at Texas State University?
 - a. If so, how did you hear?

- b. How involved would you say you are?
- 15. What motivates you to use campus support programs such as mental health, tutoring services, etc.?
 - a. Do you have any examples?
 - b. How do you feel about using campus resources?
- 16. Tell me about a time where you felt hesitant to use campus support programs?
- 17. Do you feel comfortable talking in class?
- 18. Are there specific topics that make you feel uncomfortable participating in class?
- 19. Tell me about a time where you have felt academically successful?
- 20. Have you ever dropped/withdrew from a class or felt like you wanted to?
 - a. If so, why?
 - b. Can you give some examples?
- 21. What sorts of topics might motivate or dissuade you to attend class?
 - a. Can you give some examples?
- 22. Are there supports and services that are not currently available to you that you feel you need to successfully complete your degree?
- 23. If there are any what do you have in mind?
- 24. Are there additional academic challenges you have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Housing/medical/food/classes?
 - b. Do you have any examples?
- 25. How long did you spend in the foster care system?
- 26. Do you work part-time or full-time while in school?
- 27. Do you think this affects your ability to succeed in school?
- 28. How do you feel about your course in general?
- 29. Is there anything additional you would like to share with me regarding your academic success?

30. Can you think of anything that would benefit you regarding grades/courses?
31. Has COVID-19 effected your ability to learn or attend class?
- a. Can you give some examples?
32. If you were talking to the campus advisory board and were able to tell them ways in which they could improve to help your academic success, what would you say?
33. Any final thoughts?

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