

“I Knew College Was in the Cards for Me:” The Role of Memorable Messages in Foster Youths’ Post-Secondary Education Decisions

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Foster youth attend college at a very low rate (3-11%) compared to those from the general population (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Domashek, 2011). This is unfortunate considering that college increases their earning potential and helps them to develop skills associated with being a successful adult (Okpych, 2012). This study was conducted to better understand the messages foster youth receive about college and the impact those messages have on their post-secondary education decisions. Through qualitative interviews, researchers investigated the memorable messages foster youth received that encouraged or discouraged them in their pursuit of a post-secondary degree. Specifically, interviews focused on messages foster youth received from their parents/caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers. Qualitative data analysis uncovered three message types: 1) supportive/motivational messages, 2) cautionary messages, and 3) discouraging messages. Findings suggest that supportive messages from foster parents and school counselors play a vital role in foster youths’ educational decisions.

Keywords: foster youth, communicative messages, higher education, memorable messages

Foster Youth and College Success

In 2014, there were 415,129 children in foster care in the United States, a 4% increase since 2012 (AFCARS, 2015). Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith (2001) found that 63% of former foster youth reported their desire to complete college, yet despite high aspirations, foster care youth do not attend college at a rate comparable to people outside of the foster system. High school graduation, advancement to a four-year college or university, securing steady employment and earning a living wage are all marks of successful achievement following emancipation from the foster care system (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Naccoroto, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010). However, only 3-11% of foster youth will obtain a post-secondary degree (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Reilly, 2003). Foster youth are faced with many barriers that can hinder them in their pursuit of a college degree when compared to the “average” college student, including maltreatment and placement in restrictive settings (Sheehy et al., 2001), multiple placements and associated changes in schools attended (Courtney et al., 2001), inconsistent social support, low educational expectations from caregivers and the tracking of youth into vocational rather than college education (Collins, 2001), and lack of access to educational assistance or college preparation classes and advising (Glantz & Gushwa, 2013).

Unrau, Font, and Rawls (2012) found that foster care youth in college were less academically prepared and had lower high school and college GPAs than the general population of college students at a four-year university despite being more academically motivated and positive about the college experience. A review of the literature on high school completion rates of former foster youth indicates that they remain behind their peers in high school and GED graduation rates (Benedetto, 2005).

Foster youths’ family environment, including a lack of family guidance, can create unique challenges that may impact the likelihood of college enrollment and completion among students from foster care (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Unrau et al., 2012). Family instability, experienced by many foster youth due to changes in foster care placement, is strongly associated with many adolescent outcomes that negatively predict college enrollment and completion, including diminished academic trajectories and performance (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Students from traumatic family environments may also face social and emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, stress, and lack of social support, which inhibit their ability to thrive academically (Casey Family Services, 2003).

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It is increasingly necessary to complete higher education to secure a satisfactory level of economic stability, which includes adequate benefits and a level of job security (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Porter, 2002). College graduates are likely to increase their lifetime earning potential by more than \$480,000 on average (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). College can affect nearly every aspect of an individual's life, including knowledge levels, health status, social relationships, and value systems (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College students report growing in their personal and practical competence, cognitive complexity, academic skills, and altruism (Kuh, 1993) that can come from encountering challenges during college life. There is very little known about how communication about college may impact foster youths' college decisions. To explore this phenomenon, the researchers aimed to describe memorable messages that former foster youth receive about college that may have impacted their decision to attend, remain in, and graduate from college.

Former and current foster youth are faced with many barriers in their pursuit of a college degree; regardless of those barriers, many of them still want to pursue a college degree. However, there is limited research exploring why some foster youth decide to attend college and others do not. Memorable messages have been explored in a variety of contexts such as college success (Kranstuber, Carr, Hosek, 2012) and memorable messages first-generation college students receive from their mentors (Wang, 2012). Communication scholars have yet to explore the impact memorable messages have on the educational decisions of foster youth. Stohl (1986) posits that people can recall memorable messages for a long time and perceive these messages to have an impact on their life decisions. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of memorable messages about college in foster youths' post-secondary educational decisions.

Memorable Messages

The body of communication research focusing on important communicative messages people receive and remember centers on the idea of "memorable messages." Memorable messages are "verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives" (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p. 27). Memorable messages involve brief prescriptive oral commands (Knapp et al., 1981) that often come from an authority figure (Ellis & Smith, 2004). Memorable messages have two characteristics: the individual recalls the message for a long period of time, and the individual perceives the messages as having an important influence on his or her life (Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986). The literature on memorable messages provides a useful framework for studying the messages foster youth receive about post-secondary education because memorable messages have an impact on recipients and thus may represent the most influential message foster youth receive regarding education. Memorable messages help individuals maintain or enhance personal standards (Smith & Ellis, 2001). Nazione et al. (2011) argue that memorable messages can produce action. Memorable messages contribute to the process of socializing people into organizational and personal identities (Rubinky & Cooke-Jackson, 2016). Additionally, Heisler (2014) found that memorable messages influence identity development and beliefs.

Memorable messages are remembered specifically due to the impact they have on receivers. Messages that foster youth receive about post-secondary education may play a vital role in closing the gap of foster youth college enrollment. For instance, Wang (2014) found that memorable messages from parents and family play a major role in the college success of first-generation college students, who have often been compared to former foster youth (Batsche et al., 2014). Batsche and colleagues found that students' experiences in Know How 2GO, a program for first-generation college students (FGCS), are similar to experiences of youth who had been in foster care. Engle & Tinto (2008) reported that FGCS were nearly four times as likely to leave higher education institutions without a degree when compared to their counterparts. This report also discovered that FGCS also face more challenges to graduate from college than non-first-generation college students. These experiences are comparable to those of former foster youth, therefore it is likely that they receive similar memorable messages. First-generation college students often retain memorable messages about college, including talk about pursuing academic success, valuing school, increasing future potential, making decisions, accepting support and encouragement, counting on family, and recognizing the importance of family. Kranstuber et al. (2012) studied parent memorable messages on indicators of college success, themes identified included: work hard play hard, balance work, college is necessary, and my two cents. This study shed light on the importance of positive and negative memorable messages, it also highlights

the family as a significant source of memorable messages. Familial memorable messages have been found to impact both identity and sexual behavior. Kellas (2010) describes family as an important site for memorable messages that may impact behavior and self-concept.

Memorable messages can remain salient throughout students' college experiences and post-college careers. Thus, messages can help to support and socialize students (Wang, 2014). However, Batsche et al.'s (2014) study focused on positive messages youth received about college, but little is known about those messages from family that discourage and even dissuade potential college students. While memorable message can be negative, there is limited communication research exploring the negative messages that people receive and the impact those messages have on the receiver.

While there is no research that directly focuses on the memorable messages foster youth receive from their family, family dynamics can affect educational success. For instance, family instability is strongly associated with a host of adolescent outcomes that negatively predict college enrollment and completion, including diminished academic trajectories and performance (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Foster youth are likely to experience instability within their families due to changes in foster care placement. As previously discussed, a family can play a major role in the educational decisions of youth. The messages from family to foster youth have not been studied, yet previous research has implications that those messages can be very important.

Messages from teachers and school counselors can also serve as determination and inspiration for students who decide to pursue their college degree (Wang, 2014). Ellis (2000) found that "the process by which teachers communicate to students that they are valuable, significant individuals motivated students to pursue a college education" (p. 265). Many first-generation college students, a population whose collegiate experiences are similar to former foster youth, mentioned that their high school teachers and counselors supported them in their college application (Gist, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). School counselors are the primary facilitators of college transition for many students. McDonough (2005) argued that there is no professional more important to improving college knowledge than the high school counselor. Prior research suggests that school counselors facilitate college participation by encouraging college aspirations (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010), aiding students' academic participation, guiding students through the college application process (Bryan, Holcomb, Moore, & Day, 2011), educating parents role in college planning, and ensuring that schools possess and pursue a college mission (McDonough, 1997). While school counselors play a vital role in the college planning of the typical high school student, there is no research on the role that counselors play in former foster youth's views and decisions about college.

Furthermore, of all messages teenagers may receive about college, the messages from their peers seem to have a large impact. Messages from peers can influence or deter students in their pursuit of a post-secondary education. Holland (2011) found that peers have a noteworthy impact on their friend's academic activities and their post-secondary education planning and experiences. Peers also have the potential to impact how students think about, value, and engage in academic activity. Students who have limited or sporadic access to college-educated adults may heavily rely on thoughts, opinions, and actions of their peers (Griffin, Allen, Kimra-Walsh & Yamura, 2007). Students are more likely to mirror the choices of their peers when it comes to social and academic activities. In fact, students are more likely to enroll in a four-year college or university if their friends have done the same and have similarly encouraged them (Sokatch, 2006).

Foster parents and family, peers, and school counselors all serve an important role in foster youth lives and their educational decisions. To capture the memorable messages foster youth receive about post-secondary education, we posed the following question:

RQ1: What, if any, memorable messages have former and current foster youth received from their family members/caregivers, peers, and school counselors that encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a post-secondary degree?

Taken holistically, these messages likely play a role in foster youths' views toward college, the decisions they make about attending college, and the likelihood they are to stay in and graduate from college, to some degree. Thus, to understand the overall role that former foster youth believe these messages play in their decisions about post-secondary education, we asked the following:

RQ2: How impactful did former foster youth believe that the memorable messages were on their decisions about pursuing post-secondary education?

Method

The researchers used a qualitative research design to answer the two questions. Qualitative research is the collection of extensive narrative data in a naturalistic setting (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). Qualitative research is ideal for discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships and communication styles (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data allowed us to give voice to the foster youths' experiences, which often just appear as aggregate statistical data in various reports.

Participants

The targeted population was adults between the ages of 18 and 28 who had grown up in the foster care system. After receiving university IRB approval, participants were recruited through convenience (Dörnyei, 2007) and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2013). Participants were recruited initially through various social and networking events sponsored by local universities geared towards creating a community for foster youth. After some participants were initially identified, they were encouraged to share the information about the study with any acquaintances who were former or current foster youth.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, five with former foster youth who attended college and three with former foster youth who decided not to attend college. Of the five participants who attended college, all attended a four-year institution. Two of the participants attended the same university and the other three attended different institutions. Therefore, participants were from four different institutions. The mean age of the participants was 24 (between 18 and 25 years old), and one participant was male and the other seven were female. Of the eight participants, six were African American, one was biracial (African American and Caucasian), and one was Caucasian. Institution board review granted approval to conduct more interviews, but due to the population of study, the researchers were presented with many challenges in reaching those who had not attended college and spent time in foster care. Due to certain policies, these individuals and their information are protected, making it almost impossible to reach without the help of social service agencies.

Procedures

Using Rubin and Rubin's (2012) guidelines for producing an interview protocol, we created a semi-structured protocol of open-ended questions. Participants were questioned about their decision-making process of whether to pursue a college degree and asked them to identify the encouraging and discouraging messages they received from parents/caregivers, school counselors, peers, and social workers when deciding if they would pursue a post-secondary degree. In determining if the message was encouraging or discouraging, researchers specifically asked participants their perception of the message (whether it was encouraging or discouraging them to them).

Participants were required to consent to the study prior to the interview. Interviews ranged in time from 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded using digital recorders and later transcribed, yielding 62 double-spaced pages of transcripts. All names and references to schools or cities were changed to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define qualitative data analysis as "working with data, organizing them, and breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others" (p. 153). Thematic analysis was the most appropriate method for making sense of the data, as the "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Themes bring together "components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Furthermore, thematic analysis allowed us to form a comprehensive picture of participants' collective experiences.

The researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide for conducting a thematic analysis. Phase one consists of familiarizing oneself with the data. Following this process, the first researcher transcribed the recorded interviews and read them twice, making notes in the margins on similarities and ideas that stood out. Phase

two of the guide is to generate initial codes, meaning that the researcher codes interesting features of the data. To follow this step, the researchers highlighted encouraging and discouraging messages from parents, peers, school counselors, and social workers and looked for patterns in the data. The third phase is to search for and create a list of potential themes. Phase four requires researchers to review and refine the list of themes by examining patterns within each theme and considering the importance of the theme in relation to the entire set of data. In the next phase, the researchers defined and named themes (in this phase, six initial themes were refined into three themes). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that when defining and naming, one should identify the story that each theme tells and determine how it fits in the overall story of the data. We selected excerpts and wrote the final scholarly report in the sixth phase.

Findings

In response to the first research question, three specific memorable message types emerged from the data: supportive/motivational, cautionary, and discouraging messages.

Supportive/Motivational Messages

Supportive/motivational messages were messages that provided encouragement and emotional support as well as stimulated interest or enthusiasm for attending college. These messages also provided foster youth with information about college. Foster youth who did not attend college also received supportive/motivational messages; these messages offered support of their decision to pursue other routes beside college. Parents/caregivers, counselors, and peers were most likely to share supportive/motivational messages. There were two types of supportive/motivational messages: encouraging and informational messages.

Encouraging messages. The first type, encouraging messages, explicitly stated support and encouragement for whichever decision participants (i.e., college or no college) made. For example, Laura, a 20-year-old African American woman who attends college, shared the following encouraging message given to her by her peers “Go to college and get the substance you need, use that and go into the world and do great things” (2, 81-83 – *please note: numerical notations after each excerpt reflects interview number and transcript line numbers*). Kathryn, a 19-year-old Caucasian foster youth who is currently a college student at a mid-western university, shared an encouraging message from her foster parents: “You can do it, it will be a big step. It’s a huge transition but we’re not going anywhere” (3, 41-42). This message reassured Kathryn that she will succeed during this transition. This message from her foster parents also explicitly stated their support by telling her that they would be there for her during college.

Participants who did not go to college also received encouraging messages from their parents/caregivers. Although she decided not to attend college, Rae, a 19-year-old former foster youth, shared an encouraging message about college she received from her foster parents.

“Follow my heart and do what makes me happy.” Because I already told them I don’t think college is what I want to do and they just encouraged me to “find another path” and that’s when I found beauty school and they just supported me with that. (6, 36-39)

While she did not decide to attend college, Rae felt supported in her decision by her parents because they encouraged her to follow her heart and do what makes her happy. Although this message did not encourage Rae to pursue college, it expressed support of her decision not to attend and encouraged her to find a path that would make her happy.

Informational messages. The second type of supportive/motivational message was informational messages, which provided foster youth with information about college such as applying for financial aid and completing college applications. Parents and school counselors were most likely to send these messages to former foster youth. Kayla, a 24-year-old former foster youth who attended college, shared informational support from her school counselor. She explained that “She would actually have us sit on our computer, type in the colleges that we were thinking about and look at different resources and financial aid and what type of classes they were offering

and what we would major in” (4, 96-99). Kayla’s school counselor not only provided her with information about college, but she also guided her through the process of finding a major and picking classes.

Beyond explaining how to apply for financial aid and other college-readiness behaviors, four participants gave examples of informational support related to how college would improve their lives. For instance, Sarah, a 25-year-old African American foster youth who attended college and is now pursuing her Master’s degree, discussed some of the information she received about college from her aunt/caregiver. “She shared with me that she felt like by me going to college, I would have more options and it would just be best for me to continue my education” (7, 38-39). Another participant, Mario, an 18-year-old former foster youth who decided not to attend college shared an informational message he received from his peers. “You make more money once you go to college and life changes for the better” (8, 47-48). Both messages provided participants with information on opportunities they would gain through college.

All five participants who attended college mentioned that they had to go to college, that they were always expected to attend college, and that they always knew that college was “in the cards” (5, 156) for them. These types of messages typically came from parents/caregivers. Not only do these messages serve as support and motivation to attend college for foster youth, but they also have provided information about college and encouragement for other alternatives besides college.

Cautionary Messages

The second type of memorable message that foster youth received was cautionary messages that warned foster youth about the repercussions of not attending college. Participants reported that these messages were forcibly delivered and very convincing. Participants often saw these messages as negative because the messages seemed to convey that they had no choice – going to college was what they *had* to do. Kayla, for instance, recalled school counselors who warned her about school loans and debt. She recalled that “that they were just sticklers about being sure of what you wanted to do in a sense. Yea, I think it was kind of a little bit of too much pressure” (4, 113-116).

Most cautionary messages came from parents/caregivers. Participants did not recall any cautionary messages from peers or social workers. Crystal, a 22-year-old former foster youth who currently attends college shared a cautionary message from her dad: “If you don’t work hard and do all you can, you’re going to be a failure in life, you’re not going to go anywhere, and end up working at McDonalds” (5, 53-55). She believed the purpose of his message was to warn her that she needed to attend college if she wanted to be successful in life (using “working at McDonalds” as a sign of failure). In addition, Kayla shared some cautionary messages she received from her parents as she was making the decision to pursue college. She recalled messages like “Go to school so you don’t struggle. Go to school so you don’t end up like me [her mom]. You will have better opportunities” (4, 27-28). Sarah also received cautionary messages from both her grandmother and her school counselors about her school choice. She recalled:

I want to say for a couple of schools that I chose, I know they were kind of looking at them like “Oh well that’s kind of known as a party school.” They were trying to sway my choice. But I think they were just being cautious. (7, 112-114)

Although this message seemed to express concern for her school choice, their cautionary message interfered with Sarah’s personal decision-making.

Cautionary messages were almost just as common as supportive/motivational messages. These messages warned foster youth about the consequences of not attending college, the responsibilities of attending college, and the outcomes of their school choice. Participants perceived these messages to be extremely convincing in their decision-making about college. Participants viewed cautionary messages as negative because the choice to attend college was presented as more of a demand and their only option.

Discouraging Messages

Discouraging messages was the third type of message that emerged from the data. Participants viewed these messages as unsupportive as they were deciding if they would pursue a post-secondary education. There were two

types of discouraging messages: adverse and dissuading. Participants shared adverse and dissuading messages from their parents/caregivers, peers, and their school counselors.

Adverse messages. Foster youth perceived adverse messages to be blatantly negative, mean-spirited, and emotionally harmful. These messages lacked support and encouragement during their decision-making process. For instance, Sarah's grandmother who fostered and then adopted her conveyed this adverse message because of Sarah's choice to major in Social Work:

My grandma would say stuff like "you're just like your momma, you're going to end up like her." I was just like "Ok, you don't think I'm going to finish college or something is going to happen because we both choose the same major, but she didn't finish." (7, 53-59)

Marie, a 25-year-old former foster youth, who did not attend college, recalled an adverse message from her caregiver that directly impacted her decision to not attend college. She recalled that on multiple occasions, her foster mother would tell her "you're too dumb and too stupid for college" (1, 43). Marie reflected that, "she just messed me up so bad that I started to believe that I wasn't smart enough for anything, especially college and soon I dropped out of high school" (1, 121-122). Participants perceived these messages to be mean-spirited and emotionally harmful as they made decisions about college.

Dissuading messages. Dissuading messages were not as harmful as adverse message and did not always explicitly include statements about foster youths' inabilities, but overall, they did not motivate participants. The messages seemed to result in foster youths' loss of confidence and enthusiasm for pursuing a college degree. For instance, when deciding if he should take a year off after high school, Mario's dad said: "You're not going to have any money if you go to college" (8, 37). Mario's dad did not tell him to skip college but his message did not motivate him to attend college either. Crystal received a similar message from one of her peers and her school counselor as she was deciding whether and where to attend college. "Maybe college isn't for you" (5, 101) is what one of her peers shared with her when she was struggling in a class. Her school counselors told her that she should "Be a little more realistic with your goals, come down a couple of notches" (5, 138). Although Crystal did not believe that these people were trying to hurt her by providing these messages, and these messages did not interfere with Crystal's decision to attend college, they were not encouraging. Participants considered these messages to be dissuading because they were not supportive of attending college. While both adverse and dissuading messages were different in form, they both overall discouraged foster youth from pursuing a college degree.

Impact of Messages

In response to the second research question, data analysis revealed that messages impacted participants differently depending on their post-secondary education decisions. Discouraging messages appeared to impact most strongly foster youth who did not attend college. Marie, who did not attend college, shared that the adverse messages she received from her foster mom had the biggest impact on her decision not to attend college:

I guess it just led me to believe that I wasn't ever going to be good for nothing. Um, the way I was treated, the way I was talked about. The way I was embarrassed, it was a lot. Um, I'd say I take part in some of it. But I say living in a place where you get belittled all the time had an impact on what I did with my life. (1, 86-89)

Mario, who did not attend college, also shared how a discouraging message from his foster dad about money impacted his decision not to attend college. "I didn't want to go to college if I wasn't going to have any money, I was going to make money first then go to college. That's why I didn't go" (8, 84-85).

Supportive/motivational and cautionary messages seemed to be most impactful for foster youth who attended college. Demonstrating the power of supportive/motivational messages, Crystal shared a message she received from school officials and how that encouraged her to pursue a college degree:

One of the messages that teachers who knew me would tell me was to "put it to use, make something of it." So, I can argue in a classroom all day long but until I get a degree in that field or work in that field, it's

really not going to do a whole lot. Them knowing me as the person I am and the things I'm interested in and then telling me and encouraging me to do something with it is one of the most positive things and that's what really pushed me to go into my major and minor. Definitely putting my skills to use and using what I got, teachers telling me that. (5, 162-167)

This message not only impacted her decision to attend college, but it also impacted what major she would pursue in college. Kayla, who attended college, shared that the cautionary messages from her foster parents about the likelihood of her struggling if she did not attend college impacted her decision to attend college. "I guess I probably got hung up on the 'You don't want to be struggling' type of messages. 'You don't want, I guess you don't want to have less opportunities'" (4, 122-124).

While supportive/motivational messages from foster parents seem to be most influential on participants that did attend college, one participant who did not attend college reflected on the influence her foster parents' supportive message had on her decision to not attend college. Rae said that the message from her foster parents to "follow your heart and do what makes you happy" (6, 36-37) had the biggest impact on her decision to not attend college. Rae further explained why these messages impacted her decision not to attend college and states the importance of the supportive message:

I guess it would be the messages from my parents because they were the biggest influences in my life. Them supporting me in doing what I wanted to do. I feel like if they weren't supportive of that it would definitely be a lot harder and maybe I would've thought about going to college more, if they weren't as encouraging. (119-123)

Most participants who attended college shared that discouraging messages had the least impact on their decision to attend college. However, some shared that these discouraging messages actually gave them more determination to attend college. Crystal recalled gaining motivation from her school counselor's discouraging message: "And what my school counselor said as far as college not being for me. That didn't really have an impact on me not going, it made me more determined to go" (5, 172-173). Despite the discouragement she may have received from her school counselor, Crystal was determined to attend college.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to capture the memorable messages foster youth received from parents/caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers about pursuing a post-secondary education and to understand the impact of these messages on college decisions. Three message types emerged from the data: supportive/motivational, cautionary, and discouraging. Messages from parents/caregivers and school counselors had the biggest impact on whether to pursue a post-secondary education. Peers seemed to provide the least number of memorable messages.

Implications

The findings lead to three important implications for communication and for specific members of the foster system.

Influence of memorable messages. This study highlights the importance of memorable messages in foster youths' lives. The literature on memorable messages states that these messages "may be remembered for extremely long periods of time" and "people perceive [these messages] as a major influencer on the course of their lives" (Knapp et al., 1981, p. 27). All participants in this study had already transitioned from high school and had either pursued college or joined the work force. Regardless of whether they attended college, all participants vividly remembered messages that they received particularly from parents/caregivers and school counselors as they were making decisions on whether to attend college, and these messages seemed to play in their post-secondary education decisions. In addition, data revealed both positive and negative types of memorable messages. Possibly expanding the memorable messages literature to examine the negative messages could make the memorable message framework more applicable to a variety of communication contexts. Specifically, using the memorable message

framework in more interpersonal and family communication research could allow communication scholars to understand the outcomes related to these messages.

Nazione et al. (2011) argue that memorable messages can produce action in individuals; in the case of this study, the action was attending college or not, and regardless of whether participants attended college, these messages impacted them. Those who decided not to attend college shared that discouraging messages impacted their decision the most. For example, Mario, a foster youth who did not attend college shared how the message “you’re not going to make any money if you go to college” (8, 37) from his foster dad had the greatest impact on his decision not to attend college. He did not attend college because pursuing a job that would guarantee him money was more appealing to him than a college education at the time. However, research does support that people make more money after attending college than if they do not attend college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), thus it was clear from Mario’s example that the message from his father favored the short-term benefits of working (i.e., making money now as opposed to after college), and this influenced his decision to work after high school. On the other hand, foster youth who attended college shared that supportive/motivational and cautionary messages highly motivated their decision to attend.

Only one participant recalled receiving messages from their social worker, and the only messages participants recalled receiving from peers tended to focus on college locations and whether their selected college was a “party school.” Research states that students are more likely to mirror the social and academic activities of their peers (Griffin et al., 2007), and that peers have a great impact on their friend’s educational planning (Holland, 2011). The data in this study do not support these findings, perhaps implying that foster youth do not receive memorable messages from peers and/or that these messages do not have much impact on their college decisions. This may also be attributed to the fact that many foster youth are often moving around from different homes, which does not allow them the opportunity to develop strong ties with peers who might have a big influence on their educational decisions.

Support from foster parents. The findings also suggest that there is a difference in the support that foster youth who attend college and do not attend college receive, or at least that they remember receiving, from foster parents/caregivers. Foster youth who attended college recalled more supportive and encouraging messages from their foster parents/caregivers. On the other hand, those who did not pursue college recalled more discouraging messages from foster parents/caregivers. Thus, it appears that perceived support does in fact play a role in the foster youths’ educational decisions. Pecora et al. (2005) state that one of the many reasons foster youth do not attend college is because of the obstacles they face; therefore, support is necessary when making such an important decision. These findings can help foster parents understand the role they play in supporting foster youths’ decisions about their future.

Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) discovered that a high number of foster home placements contribute to low educational outcomes of foster youth. Combined with the findings of the present study, it seems that not only more stable foster family placements but also positive messages from family about their futures play a role on foster youths’ decisions to attend college. Participants did not explicitly state that their familial stability led to collegiate success, and we did not specifically ask about the number of placements or why they moved between foster homes; however, it is likely that the reason foster youth transition from many homes could shed light on their educational decisions and success. Permanency may not guarantee educational success, but it does provide foster youth with familial stability that could influence support they receive from foster parents in their educational endeavors. Without permanency, foster youth often move from foster home to foster home, creating a variety of developmental, social, and educational impediments (Lockwood, Friedman, & Christian, 2015). Foster care placement policies could use some investigation and possibly improvements. These findings can assist social service agencies as they are placing teenagers in foster homes and working to provide them with permanency, which could guarantee foster youth some stability (Lenz-Rashid, 2006) and perhaps a more likely trajectory toward college.

Expectations from parents/caregivers can also contribute to the educational decisions of foster youth. The five participants who attended college mentioned that they felt they had to go to college because they were expected to attend and that they always knew that college was, as one participant explained, “in the cards.” The data shows that having high expectations from parents/caregivers can impact a foster youth’s decision to attend college. On the contrary, a former youth in care received negative messages from her caregiver that she was not good or smart enough for college, and she stated that she believed what she heard and these messages influenced her decision not

to attend college. This finding supports Collins (2001), who argues that low expectations from caregivers is a reason many foster youth do not pursue a post-secondary degree. This finding reiterates the impact foster parents have on their foster youths' educational decisions.

Support of school counselors. Participants had varied experiences with school counselors and received different types of messages from them. Out of eight participants who talked about school counselors, only three shared positive views of them. Comments about school counselors included: "Oh I couldn't stand them," "I really didn't like my counselors," "They were not helpful at all," "They were not helpful, and it was pretty bad. I hated them," "They weren't super encouraging from what I remember," "No support at all from my school counselors," and "There was no communication, it was not good." These insights were interesting and problematic because school counselors are the primary facilitators of a college transition for college students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Furthermore, Bryan et al. (2011) uncovered a positive relationship between school counseling and applying for college, a necessary and important precursor to college enrollment. School counselors are important in the transition to college, and the messages they share to foster youth could impact their post-secondary education decisions.

This study suggests that counselors serve an important purpose in the lives of prospective college students, especially foster youth. School counselors have direct contact with students and the ability to offer support in ways that no other professional does. The findings indicate that relations between school counselors and foster youth should be strengthened, which could mean reevaluating the training and policies for school counselors. School counselors may not have adequate training for serving special populations such as foster youth; therefore, they may not be aware of the different experiences foster youth have from those in the general population. Understanding these differences could mean that school counselors can provide specialized support to youth in care. Training school counselors on servicing special populations such as foster youth could have an impact on the messages school counselors share with foster youth as they are making post-secondary educational decisions.

Overall, these findings can be implemented in college support programs for foster youth. Programs such as First Star Academy, Foster Care to Success (Pecora, 2012), and Guardian Scholars (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010) are all geared towards success for foster youth as they navigate the transition from high school. These findings may help contribute to the development of new policies for their programs to better support foster youth. These findings may also inform program staff of messages that are most and least helpful to foster youth in their educational decisions.

Limitations and Future Research

There were a few limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the researchers did not make any distinctions between participants who were adopted from foster care and those who aged out of care. Their differences in family upbringing may impact the types of messages they received about college. The findings also disproportionately represent experiences of foster youth who chose to attend college. Including an equal number of participants from both groups could have helped tell a more representative story of the experiences of foster youth. The sample for this study was not representative of the whole youth in care population. The final limitation of this study is that participants were asked to *recall* important messages they *remembered* receiving, which suggests that these messages were most memorable to them; however, there may have been other messages they received but did not recall during interviews. Thus, it is important to find ways to capture, perhaps through a diary study or longitudinal research, the *actual* number and types of messages foster youth receive, and from whom, to gain a more complete picture of the role that messages play in their post-secondary education decisions. Scholars should also explore experiences of foster youth in junior and high school because they are currently receiving messages about college. It would also be important for scholars to explore the influence that being in contact with biological family members has on foster youths' educational decisions. Also exploring messages from teachers, mentors, religious figures (e.g., pastors, priests), and siblings would help provide a more in-depth picture of foster youths' experiences.

There is much work to be done in area of family communication focused on people in the foster care system. Scholars need to continue researching the role that communication plays in the overall lives of foster youth – not just their educational decisions but also their physical and emotional well-being, development, and success. Programs like First Star Academy and Foster Care to Success provide valuable assistance to foster youth, and

studies like the present one can contribute to a more complete understanding of how to best help foster youth in their decisions to attend college and reap the benefits that a college education can provide to them.

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