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Recognizing Resiliency in the Experiences of Current and Former Foster Youth in Higher Education

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Recognizing Resiliency in the Experiences of Current and Former Foster Youth in Higher
Education

Laura Rivera

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Abstract

This study explored current and former foster programming from local San Diego community colleges and a San Diego four-year institution to provide insight and recommendations to increase enrollment and retention of foster youth at the University of San Diego for their program Torero Renaissance Scholars. My participants included current and former foster youth who either had attended a local San Diego community college or a San Diego four-year institution. Through my focus group, one-on-one interviews, and my surveys, participants recommended a high need for four-year institutions to begin college outreach in K-12 education and inclusion of holistic resources (leadership workshops, professional development opportunities, and community networking) with a heavy focus on student well-being over the default transactional piece of finance and housing. The research completed here provides an opportunity for professionals in higher education to actively listen and read the narratives of foster youth to rethink current programming design and initiatives.

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Introduction

In my undergraduate career at California State University San Marcos, I had the opportunity to tutor at an all-boys group home. This group was composed of foster youth in high school and one middle schooler. In my interactions with the students, they were always curious about my college experience and expressed their concerns regarding access to knowledge about higher education. More specifically, they spoke about the difficulty of navigating financial aid, course enrollment and acquiring a new support system. Throughout the semester, the students I worked with changed home placements more than once—highlighting the instability this demographic faced daily.

During the tutoring, I witnessed the capability and potential the students encompassed to navigate K-12 education and transition into higher education but noticed the ostracization they faced by the same education system. For example, one youth was given a worksheet with questions for their assigned reading without owning a copy of the required text. He explained how many educators automatically placed a label of instability on him due to the number of times he experienced school relocation. Educators in his experience did not want to lose material—this resulted in a lack of equitable distribution of resources in his educational journey. Reflecting on this experience, I became aware of the inequalities within group homes and the group dynamics my supervisor once highlighted. A reemerging theme of resilience comes to mind when I think back to the youth I met in the group home. In my research, I chose to hone in on this resiliency piece, contrary to the deficit literature I found in researching articles on foster youth.

I attended a public institution as an undergraduate and I became interested in private education when I started my first semester as a graduate student at the University of San Diego

(USD). USD is well-known among those who attend the campus as a predominantly white institution (PWI) but is situated in the rich and diverse cultural community of Linda Vista. I explored the university's web page to see where current and former foster youth could find their support system. I quickly realized there was not a designated building or space I could enter to talk directly with students to hear their narratives. More specifically, I was curious about what efforts USD provided to ensure their graduation besides the default of simply admitting students. This information led me to seek information on the Torero Renaissance Scholars (TRS) program at USD in person with Dr. Cynthia Avery, who is the main point of contact for TRS while also serving as Assistant Vice President at the University of San Diego for Student Affairs.

In our conversation, I learned about the limitations USD currently faces in financing spaces for current and former foster youth and the application process for grants as a private institution. At USD, enrollment percentages of students greatly impact whether or not staff can be hired. This also applies to how physical space is determined. For example, the United Front Multicultural Commons at USD allows undergraduate student organizations such as Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA), to hold their meetings in their space. MEChA does not have its own private space currently on campus. 21% of students (this includes undergraduates, paralegals, graduate, and law) who attended USD identified in the fall of 2019 as Hispanic or Latino. Initiatives for space proposed by students are declined regularly due to the low priority administration has given to the concern. This same response of a "low priority" for a physical space was given to current and former foster youth at USD. Unfortunately, it has become a recurring theme even for other demographics such as undocumented students at USD. I also learned about the disconnect USD had with the foster care system within the greater region of San Diego. For example, there are no undergraduate courses with a community engagement

component that allow students to step into the foster care system or engage in conversations on the topic. This inspired me to pursue this topic to strengthen the relationship between the existing foster youth-centered organizations in the area such as Just in Time for Foster Youth, Promises2Kids, and USD.

In my workplace at the Mulvaney Center for Community, Awareness, and Social Action. I gained insight into how difficult it was to transfer to the university and the persistence many transfer students had to finally be admitted until the second attempt. This led me to the direction of what I wanted to explore. The research questions I looked at were: How can I increase enrollment and retention of foster youth at the University of San Diego for their program Torero Renaissance Scholars? What are the challenges foster youth face to transfer from local San Diego community colleges to the University of San Diego?

Community and inclusion are two values I encompassed daily in my role as a graduate assistant in the Mulvaney Center (Community Engagement) which was not an area I automatically gravitated to, when it came to my decision on which campus department to work in, regarding the first semester of my graduate program in the fall of 2018. My initial pull was in the direction of student support services. However, within the last past two years of working in the Mulvaney Center, the experience has further broadened my understanding and personal knowledge on the importance of reciprocal learning through the center's mission statement in community spaces outside the USD bubble.

Background

In the state of California, there have been ongoing leads by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) who began the Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI) which was implemented at the state level in 2007. "The FYSI Student Success Orientation (SSO)

created a consistent program across the state's community colleges in support of nearly 8,000 enrolled foster youth" (White, 2018, p. 60). Although efforts are currently leading change in the right direction, there are areas of overlap. I attended a meeting at the San Diego County Office of Education where monthly College Connection Advisory Council (CCAC) meetings are hosted. In the meeting, I got to first-hand hear the intersection existing within funding and resource allocation for current and former youth such as the Chafee Grant. The Chafee Grant is financial aid available for youth who were in the foster care system either as a dependent or a ward of the court between the ages of 16 and 18. For clarity, a ward of the court is defined as an individual who became the sole responsibility of the courts as a minor. The grant can be applied for multiple purposes such as technical school, rent, and child care. As an outsider, language quickly became a barrier for me, as I found myself writing down repeated acronyms and jargon. The confusion added on with the foster youth's age, it got further complicated if the foster youth was also on probation, these levels added another amount of work for the foster youth to navigate the system.

Watt, Seoyoun, and Garrison (2018) analyzed how many current and former foster youth had matching college goals as those not in the system and found that 1%-11% of foster youth alumni completed a college degree. This statistic addressed the vision and aspirations of foster youth, with the attainability unfortunately for few in higher education due to unfamiliarity. Hallett, Westland, and Mo (2018) looked at foster youth narratives through a trauma-based approach and realized foster youth who transitioned to community colleges still carried their past trauma in the classroom. The findings emphasized how past trauma impacted limited worldviews in classroom discussions and led students to create negative coping mechanisms, this highlighted a lack of preparation from institutions. Qualitative data was collected and conducted through

interviews and provided insight on how students overall felt a lack of connection with counselors, faculty, and community. Between both these articles, a theme of resiliency surfaced for foster youth who exhibited adaptability in many contexts from their K-12 schooling to attending community college and enrolling at four-year institutions.

Nguyen (2018), in her Action Research project, explored the construct of a “sense of belonging” within the Asian American community in terms of the invisibility of resources and support on the USD campus in her role as the Graduate Assistant for the United Front Multicultural Commons. Reading this AR project helped me further understand how the construct of “sense of belonging” was broken down by the conceptual and operational definition that applied to the experiences of American Asians studying in SOLES at USD. I believe the construct of “sense of belonging” is also applicable to the demographic of current and former foster youth, in their own unique experience with how resources are available, yet among the university, they remain invisible, this “invisibility” was experienced in my conversations with my classmates who were unaware a program existed for the demographic.

A common connecting piece to note primarily in communities of color is “Scholar-activism”, another construct to dismantle in understanding knowledge and how it is obtained navigating the world of academia through personal narratives, it is an approach that is often used to decolonize higher education by underrepresented groups. Derickson and Routledge (2015) took a resourcefulness approach to understand scholar-activism. This was done through three ways: the recognition and use of resources provided through academics, collaboration with non-academic communities, and finally exploring accessibility for activism. Both authors dived into the research process of scholar-activism and the pattern of separation of these two entities in past research. This historical context parallels their perspective on both these terms, which they

emphasize can exist together rather than be seen as separate. In regards to current and former foster youth, the lens of “scholar-activism” can be a form of empowerment within the community and encompass vulnerability in storytelling and create a stronger network of students.

Context

Torero Renaissance Scholars (TRS) is an organization at USD. The program was established five years ago. There is a team of eight dedicated to supporting TRS from different departments (financial aid, student support services, etc) across campus. TRS serves current and former foster youth, homeless or at risk for homelessness, and minors who were emancipated as minors or in legal guardianships. Services TRS currently offers include; housing assistance, summer internships, and mentoring. In order to enroll, undergraduate and graduate students are required to self-identify on the Free Application For Student Aid (FAFSA) and also must complete an enrollment form. In the spring of 2019, the program supported fifteen self-identified students, fourteen undergraduate students, and one graduate student. Enrolled students have access to a food pantry, which is restocked every week based on the requests from students. Requests for specific foods are documented through accessing a form on the community refrigerator. The pantry also contains products for laundry, hygiene, and school supplies. Finally, there is also room in the pantry for the Torero Closet where students can find formal clothing pieces for job interviews or other events.

As part of my research, since the Torero Renaissance program remained consistent over the last years, I took the time to heavily lean onto other campuses such as public universities and community colleges to learn and understand the different frameworks and approaches used in the services currently being done to support current and former foster youth. I decided to look at

current programming at two community colleges and one four-year institution in San Diego. I worked directly with two San Diego community colleges, these were City College and Mesa college. The four-year institution I visited was San Diego State University.

Last fall, Mesa College became the first community college in San Diego County to create a space for current and former foster youth. Through their program Fostering Academic Success and Transitions (FAST Scholars), they provide financial literacy workshops, counseling, and child care. One standout component, from FAST Scholars, includes the physical space within the center, this is nonexistent for TRS at USD. One benefit in the creation of a physical space for foster youth is; community, a place for gathering, and an exchange of ideas.

At City College, through EOPS (Extended Opportunity Programs and Services) current and former foster youth (under the age of 26) have eligibility to apply for support services in NextUp. NextUp arranges services for their foster youth which includes college field trips, financial grants, and personalized counseling (academic/career/personal). The staff stays up-to-date on financial information through active attendance in College Connection Advisory Council monthly meetings (CCAC) which is also occurring for both Nextup and TRS. With changing policies for grants and assistance for foster youth, it is essential for staff to be financially literate to further assist foster youth qualify for aid and apply for additional benefits.

At San Diego State University, the Guardian Scholars program was established in 2007, and currently has 100 students who have self-identified as current or former foster youth, wards of the court, under legal guardianship, or unaccompanied homeless youth. The Guardian Scholars is housed with the same space as EOP since many students share multiple identities such as first-generation and lower socioeconomic background. The program has taken a holistic approach, by providing counseling services, scholarships, and a food pantry. The Guardian

Scholars program in 2019, had two full-time staff, an Educational Opportunity Program counselor, three psychologists, and wellness coaches. In a conversation with the program coordinator of SDSU's Guardian Scholars, she emphasized meeting the current needs of current and former foster youth through department collaborations which can help students not feel overwhelmed in their first year of college and build the support system and community they need throughout their undergraduate years. In TRS, there is an absence for the role of a program coordinator, Dr. Avery's main responsibilities fall on serving her position as Assistant Vice President of Student Life for her daytime job. It is my own understanding, TRS became an additional task Dr. Avery took on. The assignment and inclusion of a program coordinator in TRS would allow for further programming development, a stronger community outreach, and a chance for program evaluation.

Methodology I

"Decolonization" has been at the forefront of many conversations in higher education from my own experiences in classrooms, my workplace, and at a conference, I attended last year called the National Association of Student Affairs Personnel Administrators (NASPA) held last year in Portland, Oregon. Decolonization in academia, calls into question a much bigger pattern of research methodologies currently being applied and used to conduct research cycles. Scholars Magalon, Huber, and Venez (2009) firsthand experienced the "cultural intuition" Critical Race Theory (CRT) brought in understanding their Latinx community, they discussed how current Eurocentric epistemology cannot fully capture the lived experiences of people of color in a way that does not include a deficit lens. "Cultural intuition" referred to how researchers of color can enable their knowledge to bring social change and justice to their communities (Magalon et al, 2009, p. 255).

Although I am a woman of color, there is still an accountable piece I hold myself to, in order to produce ethical research. In looking at common methodologies, one must also acknowledge the past traumatic relationship of research in communities of color by white scholars, Tilly (1998) in her study with incarcerated women of color acknowledges her own privileges as a white woman when she conducted research at a prison. The White Savior Complex is a pressing issue to be mindful of, it is the ultimate realization that the community one is entering does not need any type of saving or rescuing from their current situation. I challenge scholars to continue critiquing methodologies and improving upon them based on the community at hand.

Methodology II

Keeping what I discussed earlier (decolonization) I looked at various methodologies to find the best fit for my Action Research Project and came across O' Leary's cycles of research (See figure 1).

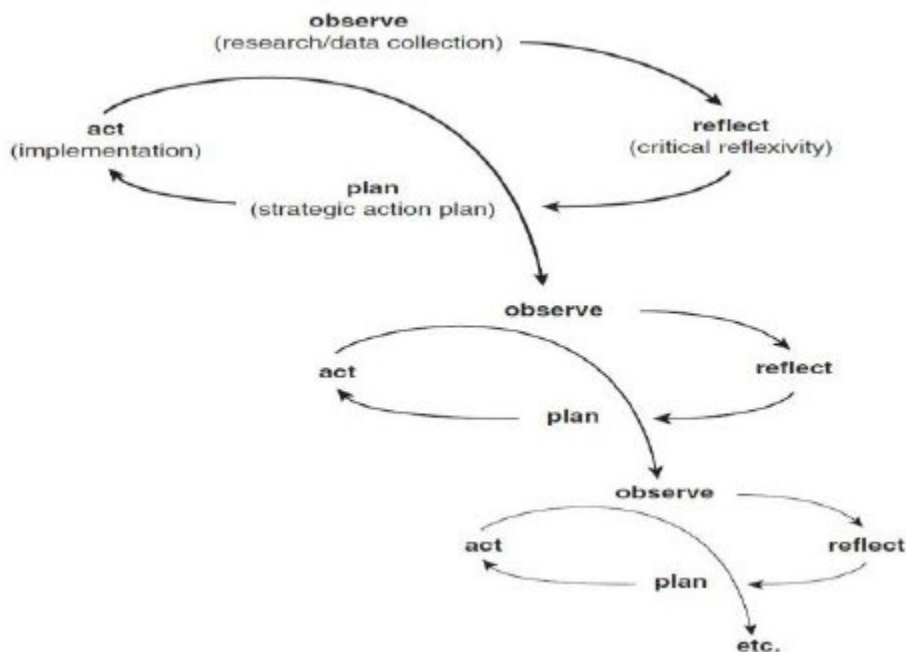


Figure 1: O’Leary’s cycles of research Diagram from Action Research in Healthcare (Koshy et al, 8).

I ended up choosing O’Leary’s cycles of research since it encompassed flexibility for my research cycles. According to Koshy et al (2011) “Excessive reliance on a particular model, or following the stages or cycles of a particular model too rigidly, could adversely affect the unique opportunity offered by the emerging nature and flexibility that are the hallmarks of Action Research”, (Koshy, 2011, p. 8). For the implementation of research cycles, there were no concrete or specific cycles to use, rather they were developed by the researcher. Continuing along with the theme of “Decolonization”, I decided to include data such as journaling and conversations. In my personal experience, both methods were data collections that provided valuable insight and embodied a narrative of “storytelling”. I noticed several times how organic the conversations flowed versus the cycles I created.

O’Shea (2016) focused on the implementation of a “strengths approach framework” in empowering first-generation college students who are up against the stratification colleges and universities deem on them and their abilities (O’Shea, 2016, p. 62). The article looked at how the duality of Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Framework and Critical Race Theory has “committed to social justice, locating the voice of the marginalized and employing the concept of intersectionality” (O’Shea, 2016, p. 64). I leaned to Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Framework to analyze the accessibility gap at local San Diego community colleges and USD as a tool to create spaces for students to engage in spaces where their voices are at the center of programming and recommendations. One limitation to O’Shea’s article was her focus on first-generation college students, although there does exist intersectionality in identities within the demographic of foster youth, the experiences only showcase one narrative.

I gravitated to Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model as a framework for my research, since it recognizes the resiliency, current and former foster youth embody. In preparing higher educational professionals, Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model encompasses a strength approach to the experiences of underrepresented students through the following types of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (O'Shea, 2016, p. 64). I used Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model as a framework to compliment O'Leary's cycles of research. Through this methodology, it allowed the opportunity for both the students and researcher to reflect on their experiences and unpack these events in a meaningful way to emphasize internal growth. The stages in this particular model, pushed connectivity and the flexibility to examine situations through a macro and micro lens. One challenge with this particular methodology was timeliness; I asked myself repeatedly if there would be enough time for students to reach the depth of conversations in my focus groups or one-on-one interviews context-wise to fill in the blanks for the stages for O'Leary's cycles of research.

Needs Assessment

Navigating USD as a graduate student, I noticed a lack of connection between the foster care system and the university, although the USD pushes for inclusion, diversity, and social justice, there are currently no collaborative efforts happening between USD and the San Diego local community colleges to increase numbers of current and former foster youth on our campus. Accountability is essential. My hope with revealing my findings is to offer an opportunity for USD to check on the overall progress for the implementation of inclusion, diversity, and social justice; values they hold close. The University of San Diego can continue to create stronger outreach with their nearby neighboring community colleges to help make the campus more approachable for current and former foster youth.

I took the time to speak with seven program coordinators/directors in person who provided services to students who identified as a current and former foster youth. These conversations helped jumpstart ideas for bridging together their institution with USD, based on their experiences in the field. This also built rapport between the college staff and myself, in order to earn their trust. Site visits allowed me to see the environment, staff were unconsciously or consciously creating to receive students. However, my interactions in these site visits remained limited with staff and did not include the students. Physical location, along with the setup of space was important to consider in order to understand what messages space can send to the demographic through the visible placement of staff and students either being placed in a silo or a capacity for active cross-collaboration engagement with another department.

In moving forward with my research with current and former foster youth, I made sure to speak with my mentor Janelle Brown-Peters and hear her advice on entering a space with a vulnerable student population and receive feedback on the direction of my Action Research Project. She became a point of contact for guidance and perspective for my research cycles. My critical friends' group: Andrew Alsoraimi-Espiritu, Adriana Rivas-Sandoval, Hugo Werstler, and Rana Al-Shaikh, colleagues in the Action Research course also provided me with different perspectives and insight on the implementation for my methodologies in my planned cycles. Hearing from my critical friends' group provided opportunities to reframe or include revisions if necessary.

Pre-Cycle: Meetings and Recruitment

Observation

For the 2019 spring semester, one of the most significant barriers I came across immediately; included the access I had to the demographic, specifically the students in the

Torero Renaissance Program (TRS). Accessibility became one of the first points of discussion which arose in the conversation I had with Dr. Avery at our first meeting. At the University of San Diego, given the atmosphere and “elitist” symbolism which had been reinforced through the cost and structure of the university sitting on top of a hill looking down at the community of Linda Vista. People of color who visit the campus are not hesitant to point out the feelings which arise, feelings of an “outsider” and “not belonging” were not uncommon. I can recall giving a campus tour to a local charter school from lower socioeconomic status and students stating “Wow, I have never seen so many people with AirPods” and “This school has actual grass”. These comments can be rooted in the wealth reflected at USD. This also tied in with the responses given to me by a college counselor when I visited City College, the campus seemed unapproachable and cold by current foster youth she met with, specifically for one student who was looking at law schools.

On the Free Application For Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), one of the questions directed to students focused on the foster care system and if they had ever been in the system. It is common for many universities and colleges to admit students then take the responses from this question and pass on this information to programs centered on helping the community of current or former foster youth on their educational journey. TRS uses the information from FAFSA regarding foster youth to reach out to admitted students (both first-year and transfer) to encourage students to also fill out the enrollment form for Torero Renaissance Scholars. TRS was not a program I was aware of; until the second semester of the first year of my graduate program.

Every summer, a graduate student in the Student Affairs/ SOLES Collaborative (SASC) is assigned to work with students in TRS. During the summer of 2019, in my conversation with

the graduate student (assigned at the time), he spoke about the overall broken structure of the program coming in as an outsider. The student mentioned how the program could lean further on leadership development and strengthen areas for more cross-departmental initiatives, to better support the students. Since the establishment of TRS, it is my understanding an evaluation has not been done on the program. In my outreach efforts over email and site visits, California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) came up often in conversations due to their ACE Scholars program. ACE Scholars on their website showed both qualitative and quantitative data for their graduation rates and the uniqueness of their program. In 2012, ACE Scholars collaborated with the Latino Research Center at CSUSM to provide an external evaluation of the program.

Plan

Understanding how difficult it would become to reach out to current and former foster youth at USD, my research question shifted from working directly with these students to exploring the process the foster youth community took to transfer to a four-year institution. My mentor Janelle at the time worked at Mesa College and was able to help me recruit participants who were willing to help me out with my Action Research Project. The team at Mesa dedicated time and effort over emails and in-person meetings to further support my project.

One of the program assistants at Mesa College created a flyer for my Action Research Project to disseminate through email outreach (see Appendix F). I formulated questions for my survey. The questions I asked in my survey (see Appendix A) focused on accessibility to resources such as mentors, community, scholarships, and their knowledge of programming for foster youth from the local San Diego universities. The survey looked to provide an understanding of the resources available to their community and where outreach efforts can be strengthened. At the end of the survey, I also provided a space to hear participant's thoughts and

recommendations if they wanted to share additional information about what helped them make a final decision to attend a four-year institution. Once finalized, I sent out the survey to 12 former alumni, program coordinators (Mesa College), college counselors (City College), and received four responses back. As a student, I knew about the importance of uplifting student voices specifically for bettering services, I intentionally created a space to hear constructive criticism from students in the survey to serve the foster youth demographic and remain an active listener.

Reflection

Seeing the four student responses (current and former foster youth), I collected from the survey helped me realize the limitations surveys could be for information and how they were not the best for gathering certain kinds of data. Surveys provided a great start, but more work needed to be done to further elaboration on their narratives. Overall, a theme emerged on cross-collaboration from different departments on campus and a call for more active allyship. Students were also aware of various resources local San Diego universities offered to their community. In my own interactions with program coordinators and directors from different foster youth-centered programs, a common reemerging theme became the own role I took on in my project. I took on the role of a messenger between program coordinators/directors and students. The staff directly communicated with their students, which ultimately provided protection by following the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Acts (FERPA). I grew to understand this method of communication as a means of maintaining and supporting their students and the rapport they had already established with them. Slow responses to the survey and reminders also grounded me into the reality of the multiple responsibilities full-time and part-time foster youth students were going through and other multiple layers foster youth were resilient in such as balancing work, internships, and other time commitments.

Action

From the time I received the student responses from the survey, I refocused my own intentions and decided to include one-on-one interviews and a focus group. I believed one-on-one interviews would help center the conversation around challenges students faced and what steps they took in facing these circumstances, while a focus group would allow students in the space to come up with themes based on what they decided to share.

Cycle one

Observation

In my first cycle of research, I picked up on a theme of “accessibility” reading participants' responses to campus resources for their given community from the surveys I sent out. I explored this pattern and I realized it was best to approach this cycle in a different direction. I decided to choose interviews for my next cycle to further expand on the details shared within the survey to hear more of a narrative piece. The low participation of people who answered my survey also reminded me to be specific and hone in on the resiliency aspect and include a lens operating from Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model. Time became another area; I deeply took into consideration. I planned for the interviews to complement the schedules of the other multiple commitments my participants were holding at the time of the project and to avoid becoming overwhelming or repetitive during the interviews with setting a limitation of four questions (See Appendix B). Seeing participants’ responses which fell on opposite sides of the spectrum, poked a curiosity within me to expand on how community played an impact or did not for those participants for how they navigated the transition from a community college to a four-year institution.

Plan

I planned three interviews based on two criteria: participants' identity as current or former foster youth and either in progress or completion of higher education in San Diego. I did not assume all my interviewees would understand Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model and I took the time to include a brief definition if needed. As for determining the locations for my interviews, I purposely strayed away from USD and went with recommendations from the participants themselves, except for the last interview which was done over ZOOM (due to COVID-19). I purposefully allowed participants to choose the space, to enable comfortability. Doing so, allowed a power dynamic to be erased and humanized the interview to flow more like a conversation. From the four original participants who filled out the survey, only three ended up following up. For all three interviews, I also implemented a personal introduction at the beginning to provide a level of understanding for how I ended up choosing my research topic and providing clarification for my allyship. I interviewed two former foster youth and one current foster youth, this mix of participants provided insight and experiences from City College, University of California San Diego, and Cuyamaca College. I reminded my interviewees that our conversation would be recorded and confidential. I continued sending out surveys at this time to maintain flexibility, I received one additional survey response from a foster youth. The additional response made the total to five.

Reflect

All interviewees were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Participants' responses to describe Community Cultural Wealth Model emerged in different forms of personal networks. A former foster youth Erin stated "Confidence came with sports", in regards to her heavy participation with basketball at Cuyamaca College. This identity as an athlete stemmed early on as a middle schooler with Erin's active membership to the Boys & Girls Club and

playing for the Lady Bulls at the Encanto Recreation Center. Erin's suggestion for increasing current and former foster youth enrollment in higher education involved a focus for preparing middle school students through mentorship and financial literacy workshops dedicated to helping foster youth understand the financial jargon such as AB 12, Chafee, and other applicable terms. Facing the unknown is what Erin believed could be prevented in the very beginning.

Current foster youth Stephanie mentioned the support and networking her high school counselor provided for the K-12 transition into college. Her counselor introduced her to program coordinators working in foster youth-centered programs, while Stephanie narrowed her choice on community colleges. Stephanie stated, "The amount of time and energy my counselor dedicated to schedule check-ins, led her to informally become my mentor". Networking provided Stephanie with soft skills to step into other places at City College to learn about resources for foster youth. Her comfortability in her identity as a current foster youth reminded her of the broader connection to a lifelong community.

For my last interviewee, Miguel was active as an undergraduate in the social realm. He ended up joining Nu Alpha Kappa (NAK) and performed on a dance team. This became parallel to his prior home life and expressed how he had to code-switch between higher education and street culture. Miguel navigated social circles quite smoothly, however, he formed a community outside of the foster youth programming offered to him at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). The transactional focus for programming at UCSD consisted of finances, this primarily arrived in loans and housing which was unaffordable. Miguel's call to action in supporting foster youth-centered around awareness and acknowledgment, he mentioned how common May was officially known for Mental Health Month but not for National Foster Care Month.

Act

In terms of commitment, I realized the importance of networking and the impact it created on participation levels. For participants who had been recruited through my mentor or who I met personally at one point, it became likely for them to be more active in their email responses for me to schedule them for an interview. To encourage participation for my focus group, I reflected on a piece of advice from a former foster youth alumnus. His suggestion included compensating my participants for their time.

Cycle two

Observation

By the end of my Action Research class in the spring of 2019, I already knew a focus group would become one of my cycles. At that time, Cheryl Getz facilitated an activity for both sections of AR, which included posters, sticky notes, and markers. Two questions were posed and every student had presented an answer, afterward, we were broken up into groups and given the task to find themes in our responses. This activity reframed data collection within my understanding of research and presented an opportunity to incorporate movement and interaction in my last cycle. I reached out to the same participants from the interviews for my focus group, however, only two were able to participate.

Plan

The focus group was roughly set in-person for late March, however, it did not go as planned. COVID-19 greatly impacted the in-person component and the schedule of my own school, work, and personal life. With the transition to working remotely and my coursework meeting online, this made ZOOM the only platform to conduct a component to meet virtually with my focus group. I asked the original questions (See Appendix C) and based on what was shared in the space between both participants I included follow up questions to look into the

similarities or differences between the challenges they faced. I created a list of words to guide the debriefing. I read the list of words and asked my participants to pick one or a few which best represented their higher education experience and follow up with themes. I also reassured them, to add any words that were not on the list.

Reflect

In my focus group, both participants held Bachelor and Master degrees and were already familiar with one another. Their additional level of study provided more context to describe the journey for each degree. Erin mentioned how finances and a lack of role models certainly impacted her pathway for obtaining a Master's degree, these areas were not as prevalent at the undergraduate level. Her support system came through Holly, her basketball coach who became family, Holly took an active role in different life situations such as when housing was unstable for Erin. While attending Cuyamaca college, Erin became homeless and lived in her car. Holly provided her housing for a while, later on, Erin also spent time at a teammate's motorhome until she secured housing. At one point, Erin's car had been broken into and Holly explained the process for reporting the incident and who to contact. Academic and personal support also arrived from a colleague during her master's program who later took on the role of a life-long friend. The words from the shared list Erin viewed as the essence for her overall higher education experience were resilience, determination, and compassion. She added teamwork, organization, confidence, structure, consistency, hard work, discipline, persistence, and strong-willed. Erin emphasized her years as a middle school athlete created the foundation for her values and kept her out of trouble.

Miguel mentioned how challenging the obstacles were for his bachelor's degree, the first one included transportation. Prior to enrolling as an undergraduate at UCSD, he lived and

attended high school in Los Angeles at the time. Orientation was a mandatory component for all undergraduates, however, Miguel struggled to obtain transportation for the day of his orientation for UCSD. Eventually, Miguel mentioned his situation to his teacher who ended up providing a ride. Miguel stated, “If it weren’t for my teacher, I probably would have not gone to UCSD”. He also explained the expensive housing for undergraduates and during his second year of the undergraduate year became homeless. He leaned on a community mentor for housing until he could figure out his next steps. For his master’s degree at USD, Miguel became active in foster youth programming, a parallel to his undergraduate experience. His leadership studies program required an internship and he took on the role of program coordinator for TRS at USD. The words Miguel framed his higher education experience from the shared list were cooperation and compassion. He suggested added empathy and connection.

Act

Throughout the entire process, a few foster youth organizations were named by participants, these were Just in Time for Foster Youth and Promises2Kids. Both participants in the focus group mentioned their past or active relationships with both organizations. I gave closure to my participants in the last cycle and provided clarification on my ongoing efforts to stay in touch with the local foster youth community. A week later, I reached out to the team over at Just in Time for Foster Youth and I am in contact with their staff to be onboarded.

Limitations

Participants

A challenge I came across in collecting data included the recruitment of participants within the foster youth community. Stigma is still attached to the identity and it could be in some situations students wanted to break free from the label and not come forward. The participants in

my project from the beginning were more active and willing to share their narratives at the start of the school year, it is possible the timeline impacted the participation for many individuals who expressed interest but held multiple commitments. A lens in Intersectionality along with Critical Race Theory also would have benefitted the project by providing how many factors held by participants could have created or hindered opportunities in their experience obtaining their degrees.

Bias

In the beginning, my bias limited my understanding of the intersecting factors foster youth encountered. My findings challenged my bias, for example how closely connected the systematic inequality of homelessness was within the community of foster youth in achieving their degrees. For mentorship, I also had not considered programming outside the university to provide support for foster youth, such as Just in Time for Foster Youth, a local San Diego organization. I became too focused on academics and forgot about external resources. Although I operated to be intentional with my cycles from the beginning of the project to the end, I noticed multiple times learning moments also happened outside my planned research cycles. In my interactions with program coordinators and college counselors; few revealed their past of being in the foster youth system. I personally learned how trust needed to be earned for an individual within the foster youth community to participate in a conversation and share their narrative.

COVID-19

My last cycle was interrupted by COVID-19. The timeline is down below.

Pre-cycle: Meetings and Recruitment (May 2019-August 2019)

- Met with Dr. Avery
- Reached out in the summer to SASC graduate assigned to work with TRS

- Attended a site visit at SDSU with Guardian Scholars
- Emailed the team over at Mesa college regarding FAST Scholars
- Recruitment emails and surveys were sent out

Cycle 1: One-on one interviews (December 2019 /January 2020)

- Surveys continued to be sent out
- Scheduled and attended a site visit at City College
- Two interviews were conducted in-person

Cycle 2: Focus group (April 2020)

- A last-minute interview was scheduled via ZOOM
- Focus group was conducted

My last cycle was scheduled to happen at the end of March. However, COVID-19 greatly impacted my own schedule and the workload of my participants, who were also asked to quickly transition to work remotely, attend to the online format for school, or take on new responsibilities and unknowns. I admire and acknowledge the people who took the time to carry out their commitments by continuing to communicate over email or through ZOOM. I maintained flexibility and carried some activities such as surveys and interviews into the next cycle if needed. I emulated an understanding and empathy for foster youth who expressed interest but could not participate.

Institutional Recommendations

I. The implementation of a tutoring program with a focus on serving foster youth

The Mulvaney Center supports the local San Diego Unified School District by having USD undergraduate and graduate students at placements such as Carson Elementary School,

Montgomery Middle School, and Linda Vista Elementary School. These students take on roles as academic tutors, while also serving as mentors. If stronger initiatives and interest were taken within the center, a program with a community engagement piece could be formed similar to what is already existing at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) and at San Diego State University (SDSU) as the Tutor Connection Program. In my junior year at my previous undergraduate institution, the Tutor Connection Program paired fellow classmates majoring in Liberal Studies from higher-division courses (typically juniors and seniors) with foster youth for the semester. This reciprocal partnership could be extended with organizations such as Just In Time for Foster Youth or Promises2Kids, USD students would gain insight about the foster care system through interactions, while foster youth would begin strengthening their networking in San Diego and participate in the formation of their own community.

II. Designing visible leadership opportunities for foster youth in a physical space

In truly elevating voices of foster youth, representation is equally important in leadership positions. At USD, many leadership roles are existing with Greek life, student organizations, student affairs, except for foster youth through TRS. Miguel during the interview mentioned taking on the role of a program coordinator in TRS through an internship. If more similar opportunities could be carried out in a physical space, this would include a chance to incorporate more holistic efforts for foster youth who could facilitate programming, workshops, and cross-collaborations across departments. Ideally, it would mirror the physical space FAST Scholars currently has over at Mesa College, who recently received a center for foster youth to gather and access resources in-person than online. Space is a tricky topic at USD, the distribution of space for centers is limited given the size of the campus. However, it is also possible for different groups of students to share spaces as well, this model was seen over at SDSU through the

Extended Opportunity Program, students in the program who either first-generation, lower economic status, or historically underserved, are on the same floor with undocumented students, and foster youth but in different rooms. The close proximity of resilient student groups in the same space could strengthen allyship.

Personal Reflection

As someone who does not hold an identity as a current or former foster youth, I always felt welcomed as an ally by support staff who worked with foster youth and my participants throughout this entire process. Once the community knew my intentions for my project, they helped onboard me and introduced me to other people who could provide support within their network. I learned to be mindful of the space I did take up and to actively listen. This Action Research Project built a foundation for me to continue learning more about the community and to strengthen my existing relationships. I am thankful for the feedback, time, and patience I received from my participants. People who enter higher education know the profession is a small world and it is even smaller within the realm of professionals who choose to serve foster youth, (while many hold this identity) and continue to share their narratives. I can recognize my own positionality and privileges as I am transitioning from a full-time graduate to a full-time working professional and will use my knowledge to seek or create networks of people who are dedicated to supporting foster youth. The community will continue to be a value I place at the forefront of my work in higher education even after graduation.

“It takes a village to raise a child”- African Proverb

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Please describe your understanding of Community Cultural Wealth.
2. What are academic organizations you participate/ participated in at your community college?
3. What suggestions do you have for four-year institutions to implement in order to increase enrollment of current and former foster youth?
4. What has been the process for your identity as a current and former foster youth?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

Directions: Read every question and circle the response that best represents your experiences (except the last question that is a short answer).

1. What has been your process navigating (access to scholarships, mentors, or community) in higher education as a current/former college student?

- 1-Fairly difficult
- 2-Difficult
- 3-Neither difficult or easy
- 4-Easy
- 5-Fairly easy

2. Read the following statement

I have an understanding of the academic resources available to current and former foster youth from local four institutions. (If you only know of one institution, circle that one institution).

- A. SDSU
- B. UCSD
- C. CSUSM
- D. USD
- E. All of the above
- F. None of the above

3. What are areas you feel impact/impacted your decision to attend a four-year institution?

- A. Financial Aid
- B. Availability of mentors/allies
- C. High student enrollment of current and former foster youth
- D. Active collaborations between local foster youth organizations and the four-year institution
- E. None of the above

4. Is there anything else you would like to add below when looking at four-year institutions that was not mentioned above?

Appendix C

Focus Group Activity and Questions

Script: In groups of three, through the ZOOM format, participants will have the opportunity to share the challenges they came across in higher education and how they navigated them with their support system. The participants will choose words from a provided list to sum up their higher education experience.

Facilitator: Please share the barriers you have come across in your journey in accessing higher education.

Facilitator: Please share if you had a mentor, classmate, or support system at your current campus?

Facilitator: Based on what was shared between participants, are there any areas of overlap you relate to?

From the following list of words, is there any word or set of words which best represents your experience?

Independence	Determination	Sacrifice
Compassion	Strong-willed	Acceptance
Loyalty	Connection	
Cooperation	Resilience	
Freedom	Perseverance	
Peace	Overcoming obstacles (personal/career)	
Empathy	Fate	
Discipline	Hope	

Appendix D

Consent Form

**University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:
Recognizing Resiliency in the Experiences of Current and Former Foster Youth

I. Purpose of the research study

Laura Rivera is a student in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to explore how current and former foster youth at the community college level, participate in the decision process in selecting a four-year institution.

II. What you will be asked to do

Survey

Participate in answering questions about the process in choosing a four-year institution of higher learning.

Focus group with activity

Participate in a focus group activity that requires your responses in sticky notes that asks you questions about barriers to higher education, and your support system. A vocal debrief of the focus group process will also be part of the activity.

One-on-one interviews

Participate in a private interview about your understanding of community wealth, your journey as an undergraduate student, and identity development.

You will be audiorecorded during the private interviews and focus group activity.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 180 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:

San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how current and former foster youth navigate higher education and for the researchers to use their positionality to make inclusive changes to the demographic (based on what was found in the data), whether it be through field trips, workshops, or providing additional support through networking or professional development.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide **may** be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and used in future research.

VI. Compensation

a) If you participate in the study, the researcher will give you \$15 in the following way: (personally, via Venmo, or Cash App)

You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire interview, focus group, or survey.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Laura Rivera

Email: lriviera@sandiego.edu

Phone: (760) 215-2476

2) David Karp

Email: dkarp@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix E
IRB Faculty Approved Letter



Leadership Studies
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P: (619) 260-4289

October 14, 2019

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110

To the University of San Diego Institutional Review Board:

I approve Laura Rivera's research project entitled Recognizing Resiliency in the Experiences of Current and Former Foster Youth in Higher Education. Her study serves as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA in Higher Education Leadership Studies at the University of San Diego. Laura Rivera will carry out her research following sound ethical principles and participants involved in the study will be strictly voluntary and data collected will be confidential.

As the advisor of Laura Rivera's action research project, I will check in with her on a regular basis to advise and guide as needed. Should you require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at (619) 260-4760 or dkarp@sandiego.edu.

Sincerely,

David R. Karp, PhD
Professor of Leadership Studies
Director, Center for Restorative Justice
<https://www.sandiego.edu/soles/restorative-justice/>

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Appendix F
Recruitment flyer

WANTED: FOSTER YOUTH RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

BE A PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY AND GET
COMPENSATED FOR YOUR TIME!

RECOGNIZING RESILIENCY IN
THE EXPERIENCES OF
CURRENT AND FORMER
FOSTER YOUTH

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