

WHEE SUPPORT YOU

WHEE SUPPORT YOU:  
CREATING ONLINE SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE FOSTER CARE ALUMNI

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of  
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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**Abstract**

Students who age out of the foster care system may no longer be eligible for federal and state support services and immediately become responsible for maintaining their wellbeing. This loss is multiplied as students lose their support system at a time of transition and change. The multiple transitional challenges, coupled with past traumas, position Foster Care Alumni (FCA) as a highly vulnerable group in society. While most FCA students aspire to continue their education at the secondary level, only 3% will earn a bachelor's degree. The purpose of this project was to increase the outcomes of FCA students at Western Carolina University (WCU) by creating online supports to assist with degree completion.

At WCU, the context for this disquisition (dissertation in practice), FCA students are not identified as a unique population at the university level, making it difficult for the university to be proactive in providing FCA students with the resources they need. While other universities have created dedicated support offices to assist the FCA population students, that was not possible with the present level of staff and financial resources at WCU. Using available resources (committed personnel and an on-line repository of resources and support), a design-team attempted to provide support to FCA in an effort to improve their education-related outcomes. The repository was located on a comprehensive website containing locations and types of resources unique to the FCA population. To examine its effectiveness, students were asked to self-identify their FCA status to participate in the project. Participants were surveyed about their awareness and use of resources at the beginning and end of the project. Analyses of survey data, website analytics, and personal interviews were performed to determine the intervention's success during the fall 2020 semester.

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Findings suggested that online resources alone do not provide adequate support for the FCA population and should be used as supplemental support to a dedicated FCA support staff position.

*Keywords:* foster care alumni in higher education, FCA outcomes, FCA support



### **Whee Support You: Creating Online Supports for Students Who Are Foster Care Alumni**

Each year in the United States, approximately 18,000 college-aged students will emancipate or "age out" of the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Youth are emancipated from foster care between the ages of 18 and 21, depending on individual state regulations (Batsche et al., 2014). Less than 3% of students in foster care will go on to graduate with a four-year college degree (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Depending on state regulations, students who age out of the foster care system may no longer be eligible for federal and state support services and may immediately become responsible for maintaining their own wellbeing (Wolanin, 2005). As students lose their support system at a time of transition and change, a time when many of their peers have established support structures of family and community, their losses are multiplied, having a lack of familial support as a first-time college student. The student's loss of the surrogate family and foster care system supports are coupled with the multiple responsibilities of adult life, including securing housing, managing finances, and creating personal relationships. The numerous transitional challenges, coupled with a high incidence of past traumas, position foster care youth as a highly vulnerable group in society. Foster Care Alumni (FCA) is a common term used throughout the literature to describe individuals who have spent any time in the foster care system and are over the age of 18 (Geiger, Cheung, Hanrahan, Lietz, & Carpenter, 2017; Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016; Geiger, Piel, Day, & Schelbe, 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Randolph & Thompson, 2017; Retention Management and Planning, Center for Student Retention, & faces, 2019; Salazar, 2012; Sensiper & Barragán, 2017; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013).

All children are considered by society as deserving of assistance regardless of their birth circumstances and therefore should be provided with supports funded by federal, state, and local

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funds as needed (Broton, Frank, & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). A deficit ideology mindset places the unfavorable circumstances on the family rather than the unequal systems and structures in place. In 2015, there were approximately 428,000 children in the foster care system, and by 2017, that number had risen to 443,000 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). These children found themselves separated from their biological families for various reasons. Most children in foster care experience some combination of physical abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, homelessness, and poverty (Davis, 2006). They live under the care of people other than biological parents, who do not always understand the underlying reasons that led them to the foster care system.

Foster care youth rely on strangers to provide basic needs as well as to be their support structure. This scenario leads to varying degrees of personal involvement, relationship building, and success for the family unit and the individual (Franco & Durdella, 2018). The foster care system's core focus is to provide a safe living space (Morton, 2017). Some will be in supportive homes that provide genuine and sincere financial, academic, and social support, while others will not be as fortunate. Many foster care children feel a lack of community due to new surroundings and changing schools, homes, and classmates (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Children who lack a stable family also lack the support and intangible benefits often associated with the traditional family. These benefits are so ingrained in the idea of American images of the family that most individuals do not consider an alternative to the conventional family structure unless it is lost to them (Seita, 2001). The privilege of belonging, being motivated, being safe, and the benefits of the family are well known as this privilege provides our values and safety (Seita, 2001). Even when separated by distance, the family remains part of who we are. For children in foster care, the idea of the family may be nonexistent or may consist of many families over the years as

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children move from home to home. With each move, children in foster care must make decisions about whom to associate with and talk openly to, how attached to become to the support offered, and how deeply to bond with the people they meet.

Aging out of foster care is sudden, immediate, and complete without caveat (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Once the critical birthday socially symbolizing adulthood arrives, age 18 (21 in some states), independence for the individual begins regardless of readiness or skillset. For the individual facing emancipation from the foster system, securing housing, transportation, and employment are the most urgent priorities. For children who age out of foster care, it can be difficult to think about the future when their basic survival needs are not guaranteed or supported by family or other supports. The transition to adulthood is an endeavor the new adult must undertake without a safety net. There is not a slow transition where any misstep in securing one of the basic needs means one can return home. This lack of assurance represents a good number of FCA student populations who struggle with being independent and the knowledge of how and when to ask for help from others (Morton, 2017).

Many FCA have high aspirations of completing some level of higher education and have a high desire to advance their education. Studies by Courtney et al. in 2007 and 2010 indicate that 70% of students in foster care want to attend post-secondary education (National Foster Parent Association, n.d.). While 50% (70% for their peers) of foster care youth will complete high school or obtain equivalent education, it is estimated that 17% (60% for their peers) will be eligible to enroll in a higher education institution, and 3% will complete a degree program (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Hallett & Westland, 2015). These figures demonstrate that obstacles exist for FCA student enrollment, persistence, and completion. Not only do the barriers faced by FCA students exist, but they are also compounded with those faced by their

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peers and other first-generation students. These barriers create a non-linear and challenging path to completion that is more complex due to a lack of needed supports available to those without family and community relationships and lack of understanding of the available supports. It has been difficult for researchers to determine why students do not complete their education, as current assessments are based on problems before enrollment in college (Davis, 2006).

Determining why students leave college is challenging as students become disengaged and institutions lose contact with them.

In the U.S., children are often told that they can grow up be whatever we want to be in life, but this statement assumes the privilege of a student coming from a traditional family with traditional support systems. In addition to various support systems provided by conventional support structures, young adults need tangible and emotional support from adults to survive and be successful.

Many students will not have the cultural capital to exchange for support and opportunities. Cultural capital is the knowledge that serves as a type of currency that alters an individual's experiences and opportunities available to them. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) writes about cultural capital in the book *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. He explains that cultural capital can be a source of social inequality. For a student, gaining cultural capital can be like playing a game for which you don't know the rules. To gain cultural capital, someone must have time and access to the culture. A high school student who works to support their family may not have time to study, leading to lower grades, impacting college admission. Lower social class generally means less cultural capital. Cultural capital exists in three states, embodied (person's knowledge about the world), objectified (material objects such as books, brands, etc.), and institutional (how society measures social capital) (Bourdieu & Passeron,

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1990). A person must have time to access the objectified state if it is to be the embodied state. Children born into a family with cultural capital are more likely to gain more cultural capital as they represent the values and behaviors that society rewards with more opportunities. They can then exchange their cultural capital for other goods and services. For example, a student with a vast knowledge of art can exchange that knowledge for a good relationship with their art teacher, leading to higher grades and ultimately better job opportunities in the future. Capitalist societies reproduce themselves also reproducing existing class and ethnic inequalities and the ideologies that contribute to the inequalities. The ideology that everyone has the same opportunities and outcomes based on merit justifies the inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The differences are individualized and transmitted through institutional practices and embodied with the individual. The ideology that anyone can do something proves that everyone can do it distracts from and conceals the more significant inequalities. Selectively choosing positive examples of success further conceals and perpetuates the ideology.

The national interest to increase the number of college graduates has shifted access to college for many students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Advancements in college access have meant more opportunities for low-income students to attend post-secondary institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

### **History and Current State of the Problem**

The earliest concepts of foster care begin in the mid-nineteenth century. The industrial age was moving populations and encouraging population growth in urban areas. Seeing this first hand, a minister in New York began a movement to help homeless children find homes with willing families (National Foster Parent Association, n.d.). The action was not a placement for the purposes of apprenticeship or child labor, but instead, a social movement to aid those in need,

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a byproduct of the Second Great Awakening (Britannica, n.d.) and its influences beyond the religious lives of individuals. The most significant issue with this form of foster care was that these were unsupervised placements. Such a scenario presented the opportunity for unscrupulous individuals to benefit financially from the children in their care. It was not until the early 1900's that local, state, and federal agencies began regulating this concept. New bureaucratic organizations were created to keep individual records and provide support for children, often with the hope and goal to return children to their natural families (National Foster Parent Association, n.d.).

Today, much of the original foundation of early foster care remains. Those who seek to be of help are often driven by social responsibility or a devout desire to assist those who need help. These drivers are a bridge between the natural family and the process of adoption and allow a respite for legal or protective reasons. Children may be removed from their biological family for a limited time or permanently depending on individual situations such as abuse, neglect, or another trauma.

Higher education benefits are an opportunity for this population as studies demonstrate that advanced education elevates social and monetary mobility, therefore making further advancement a possibility (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). Much of the research shows that numerous supports exist for FCA students but are scattered, and higher education institutions are still in their infancy in terms of supporting these populations at the same level they support other at-risk groups. Researchers have performed studies on FCA persistence rates from high school through college, resulting in various percentage outcomes. In a 2004 survey of Midwest youth, almost 70% of respondents (N=732) indicated that they aspired to attend post-secondary education (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.). According to Casey Family

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Programs (2010), up to 13% of foster care youth enrolled in post-secondary education, and only 2% obtain a degree.

An overwhelming number of FCA are considered first-generation college students. Research says first-generation students are less likely to take advanced-level high school classes and entrance exams, college-preparatory learning courses, and lack the know-how to navigate the college admissions (Batsche et al., 2014; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). FCA frequently experience the same frustrations as traditional first-generation students but may have their education disrupted by emotional and physical issues such as insufficient money or housing. Without family support, FCA college students may lack the ability to pay for necessary expenses (Batsche et al., 2014).

Numerous federal initiatives have been introduced to help students attend institutions of higher education. The most well-known include the Pell Grant program, a need-based grant program available to students attempting to complete their first degree (Benefits.gov, n.d.). The Pell Grant has increased over the last several years, but so has the cost of college. Funding for Pell Grants and Federal Work-Study programs has not adjusted as tuition has increased (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The uncovered cost of college by the Pell Grant is between 70% and 80% of the total (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Almost 50% of students who receive Pell Grants are from families below the poverty line (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Students must identify other supporting revenue sources, such as working or taking loans, or educational plans are abandoned. Low-income, first-generation students are more likely to live and work off-campus and are typically less engaged in non-class campus activities (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Individual institutions and states offer matching funds or assistance in identifying potential student loans, but this is not an easy path to student support. First-generation studies indicate that many students in that

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population use the same financial and support systems to identify revenue streams for tuition, fees, and ancillary academic costs as FCAs. Still, FCA students have greater difficulty accessing these. The nature of the foster system is one of movement rather than solidity, exacerbating socioeconomic uncertainty, home life instability, untreated mental health, and associated conditions beyond those experienced by first-generation students.

FCA students that choose to attend post-secondary institutions will likely still need supports to be successful. Finding a community of support and resources is difficult if these are not identified and presented in ways that students can access, requiring they are proactive and knowledgeable about their availability and locations of these support pieces. Western Carolina University (WCU) does not have a dedicated program for FCA students. Available resources are spread through campus and often require students to go to a physical office to obtain services. Requiring students to find resources when they may be in a crisis is arduous and unaccommodating. This project highlights some of the findings discovered from WCU students who identified themselves as FCA and participated in interviews and surveys. Several questions arise when thinking about providing institutional supports for FCA students.

1. How many students identify as FCA students and may not be aware of the current resources available?
2. How can WCU create proactive resources and supports for students who are not formally identified by WCU?
3. Is WCU providing resources that students need, and how do we know?



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These questions act as a pathway to better understand the FCA population's needs and assess how resources are needed and used. Answering these questions can shape the future for providing support for students that may find themselves in need.

It is unknown how many students identify as FCA at WCU. Students must self-report, either by indicating their status on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or disclosing their status to a specific office. Information is not readily available across offices due to privacy regulations. In conducting the project, it was also found that not everyone that identifies as FCA complete the FAFSA correctly, or at all. Without the ability to clearly identify the population of FCA, it is challenging to meet their needs.

After interviewing staff of programs at other institutions and what is revealed in the literature, many FCA students desire to shed the FCA label and make a fresh start. Several program directors indicated that students want to distance their new adult life from their former foster care life due to the stigma they felt was associated with being in the foster care system. While turning 18 and beginning college is an opportunity to start anew, it is also a time of uncertainty. Justine Cheung, Coordinator of Arizona State University's (ASU) Bridging Success Program, also finds it challenging to identify FCA students at ASU, the country's largest public university. Developing a process for FCA students that can help them be proactive in their search for assistance and providing assistance with limited human and physical resources is challenging, especially if their desire to be anonymous outweighs their perception of what assistance looks like and when that assistance is available.

Students need to be involved at levels of resource identification and distribution as they are in the position to inform the institution what they need. While the research can be utilized as a guide for creating programs, specific student needs will vary (Casey Family Programs, 2010;

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Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Watt et al., 2013). For example, WCU's rural location and limited public transportation make it challenging for students without vehicles to obtain groceries and attend doctor appointments.

### **Literature Review**

The current and past literature on the tribulations and supports for FCA students reveals a recurrent theme of obstacles and opportunities for FCA students as societal, institutional, and private supports are created and altered to mitigate the challenges of obtaining a higher education degree.

Youth in foster care is a well-researched subject with numerous topics for academic comment. The system and its impact have been examined and available for analysis for over 150 years, but little has been done to highlight the post-secondary and early adulthood experiences of the population. The investigation of the role of the foster care system and FCA students in higher education began to see more academic exposure after 2003 when the Casey Foundation released results of a national foster care alumni survey (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016). Since then, a focus on the sub-group of marginalized students that require additional support has emerged as an area of research.

### ***Chutes and Ladders: Early Experiences for Foster Care Youth***

The current literature analyzes the importance of providing resources to this diverse at-risk population of students as they matriculate through and out of high school. Many students change schools multiple times, often losing records or transitioning mid-semester, resulting in repeating courses and lengthening their academic journey. Over 34% of foster care students change schools five or more times by age 18 (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Champs, 2018). Frequent home placement changes cause disruption compounded by school changes, lost

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records, and re-engaging social and academic services (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Delays in registration, receiving Special Education, and obtaining remedial services are also obstacles to overcome (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Home placement changes resulting in school changes lead to the student's loss of friends and relationships. Staff at the new school are often unaware of individual situations and cannot provide consistency (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Information such as school records and medical records are rarely shared across multiple agencies (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Foster care students are not encouraged to advance their education in the same ways as their peers (Allen & Vacca, 2010). This may be a choice of the administration or a byproduct of the desire to seek academic completion rather than planning for academic advancement and making college an expectation rather than an aspiration.

High turnover rates of workers in the foster care system also diminished opportunities for relationships between children and adults (Davis, 2006). Turnover affects the structure of mentoring and the ability to identify adult role models (Davis, 2006). FCA students who succeed in this environment may not persist in their educational pursuits without the extensive support available before they turn 18. Support challenges are in addition to the transition to the post-secondary level. Therefore, FCA students are more likely than their peers with traditional family support to drop out of college in their first year (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011).

### **Post-secondary Transitions for Foster Care Youth**

Approximately 10% of FCA enroll in some type of post-secondary program, although 70% say they have the desire (Davis, 2006). FCA students experience many of the same challenges as first-generation students with the added obstacles of inconsistency in education, lack of student advocacy, and lower academic expectations (Allen & Vacca, 2010). FCA students also have similar needs as first-generation students combined with a set of experiences

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that must be taken into account when creating institutional supports (Batsche et al., 2014). Foster students rarely go beyond passing to excellence in the classroom. Academically they often suffer more from difficult classroom experiences because of their transitional experiences (Allen & Vacca, 2010). The rigors of education for college-bound students are continually increasing, allowing others to move further ahead of FCA students, increasing the size of the achievement gap between high school completers and college prospects (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). FCA students struggle to navigate the post-secondary system of gaining entrance to a higher education institution because many are dealing with securing other life essentials. As many as 50% of FCA students have some combination of housing, food, and clothing insecurity, making their struggle for daily security more critical than accessing college (White, 2018).

While the importance of college as a societal norm in America has increased, accessibility remains an issue for many ill-supported FCA students. Minimum requirements for admissions are not necessarily enough to secure admission in an incoming freshman class. Students from a foster care background must compete with more academically prepared peers and more well-rounded candidates for admission. Students in foster care also may miss opportunities in sports, test preparation, and other extracurricular activities because of a lack of financial support or constant relocation (Geiger & Beltran, 2017).

Failure to secure a college education leads to continued stigmatization for FCA students as the American job market continues to grow in areas that require college-level education (Okpych, 2012). This means that FCA students are not only falling behind in the classroom and the high school experience; they are also being set up for lifelong struggles as they cannot compete with their peers if they lack shared academic experiences.

***Press Your Luck: Navigating Post-Secondary Financial Aid***

Finding ways to pay for college is not unique to FCA students. The cost of attendance is almost the same for FCA and non-FCA students (Davis, 2006), and the unmet financial need is similar after financial aid is applied (Engle & Tinto, 2008). One of the fundamental differences is that FCA students can be declared independent and report drastically lower incomes than non-FCA students (Davis, 2006). FCA attending college are usually older, have less financial support from family, have multiple obligations that compete with time and resources (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Low-income students are more likely to work to pay for expenses (Bozick, 2007). Students who work more than 20 hours per week and live off-campus are more likely to leave school than those that work less and live on campus (Bozick, 2007). Working has short-term benefits and long-term consequences as students typically earn fewer credit hours, prolong their time to degree completion, and are at increased risk of not completing their degrees (Bozick, 2007).

As early as 1990, family socioeconomic status has been the most significant contributor to student success as adults, above education skills and personal ambitions (Burley & Halpern, 2001). A Pell Institute study found that 11% of low-income, first-generation students had graduated in six years from any not-for-profit institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008). There were also disproportions in ethnic and racial minority backgrounds and academic preparedness (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Most of the focus on low-income populations has been on access and federal financial aid (Bozick, 2007), while a lack of structured support and services exists (Davis, 2006). Most financial aid is in loans that require repayment and are not desirable, leading to a lack of desire to apply for government financial aid (Bozick, 2007). Students look for ways to reduce costs by working and living at home. Families pass their economic resources to their students in

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some form of payment for college (Bozick, 2007). For students that do not have family support, this could be mean no financial support at all. Having lower-income and a higher number of siblings increase students' responsibility to finance their education (Bozick, 2007).

### *Life Beyond Academics*

In addition to this socioeconomic scenario, FCA students are often dealing with self-care issues, such as mental health and addiction, and many cannot adequately express their needs and concerns. A considerable lack of personal advocacy techniques and even basic knowledge of support structures plague FCA students. Without the skills and the means to tell their story, FCA students often cannot successfully advocate for themselves. The lack of skills in advocating for their best interests is exacerbated as they do not know how to receive support from personnel who are waiting to assist them. FCA students may have trouble communicating with, trusting, and accepting support from their foster family, guidance staff, and school personnel to assist students in their situation (Allen & Vacca, 2010).

FCA students must also process the sudden transition to adulthood while simultaneously negotiating the college application system and the first-year college experience. Many young people feel that they are not adults when they graduate high school. As Arnett (2000) explains, the transitional experience has changed over generations, which has affected young adults' ability to navigate the additional complications of adulthood found in the first-year college experience. Youth do not always consider themselves to be an adult even up to the thirties, a time by which they should have completed degrees, chosen careers, and advanced toward establishing themselves professionally. Adulthood cannot be tied to an exact age but rather a frame of mind (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood has been coined as the time when a person is between the age of 18 and 25, not physically a teen and not psychologically an adult (Arnett, 2000). Over the

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last decades, normative adult roles have been formed later in life. Delaying marriage and parenthood has led to independent living as the next milestone after high school (Bozick, 2007). The median age of marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men in 1970. In 1996, the median age had increased to 25 and 27, respectively (Arnett, 2000). This is a time when young people educate for careers and define adulthood for themselves. It is a time of changes in relationships, work, and when views of the world are developed (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is the time that most adults reflect on as their defining moments. FCA students do not often experience emerging adulthood and enjoy the privilege of time to explore who they are and who they want to be as an adult. Even as psychologists have stated that the emerging adulthood age has changed over time, the legal age of adulthood has remained 18 in the eyes of the law and the foster system (Arnett, 2000). They are responsible for their food, clothing, transportation, and education after receiving support from the foster care system (Batsche et al., 2014).

In most cases, Foster care has provided transportation, counselors and social workers, housing, and health care, all of which end at the time of emancipation (Broton et al., 2014). Adults formerly in foster care are more likely than the general public to have less favorable outcomes (Allen & Vacca, 2010). There is limited literature on how the emerging adulthood theory intersects the experiences of students in foster care except that associated research supports the idea that the experience of individuals from a foster care background may be similar but compounded (Singer & Berzin, 2015).

### ***Guessing Who: Research Efforts for FCA in Higher Education***

The lack of specific research about support programs is another obstacle to analyzing FCA student support's efficacy. The lack of research on how social experiences and family life affect transitioning to post-secondary institutions led some institutions to underserve the FCA

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student population (Franco & Durdella, 2018). This begins with the core ideas of why and what programs should be implemented to assist this population but is best manifested in the lack of understanding surrounding what makes individual or combined support programs successful. Despite this lack of data, several state institutions have created programs that are well known in the academic field (Geiger et al., 2018).

The single largest collector of data on foster youth is the National Youth in Transition Database, which was made operational in 2011 and requires all 50 states to report data (Youth.gov, n.d.). State reporting to the database is required by law, and information is submitted semiannually (Youth.gov, n.d.). This database contains information on student outcomes, homelessness, and other demographic identifies. From this data, the academic consensus is that most FCA students often feel isolated, have difficulty adjusting to the new surroundings, and lack self-confidence (White, 2018). This makes FCA students strong candidates for support programs. Many of the existing college programs are in the startup phase, and most literature on them is found in dissertations or research from faculty involved in program administration (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). The literature supports that academic performance and increased graduation rates can be influenced by providing increased resource compilation into an accessible and enduring process for FCA students (Geiger et al., 2018; Watt et al., 2013).

### **The Problem in Local Context**

For the purposes of this project, the focus is on identifying eligible students who should be using services to better prepare them for their educational goals and life after graduation. Based on census data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), North Carolina's population is around 9.5 million (10.3 million estimated in 2018). The high school graduation rate is 86.9%, and 29.9% of residents earn a bachelor's degree or higher. Census data also indicate that around 55%



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of the population is between the ages of 18 and 65 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). These are individuals with which FCA students will compete for jobs, housing, and other resources.

Currently, North Carolina does not have a formal tracking system to monitor outcomes for this specific population. N.C. supports eligible foster care alumni through the N.C. Reach program, which provides N.C. residents with funds to attend any of the N.C. Community colleges or N.C. public universities (NC Reach, n.d.) In 2018, there were approximately 17,280 children under the age of 18 in foster care in North Carolina (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.), and four percent age out each year (Casey Family Programs, 2019). Figure 1 illustrates the reasons children leave foster care (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) below illustrates the reasons students leave foster care in North Carolina. For the purposes of this project, the focus will be on the four percent of students that age out of foster care.

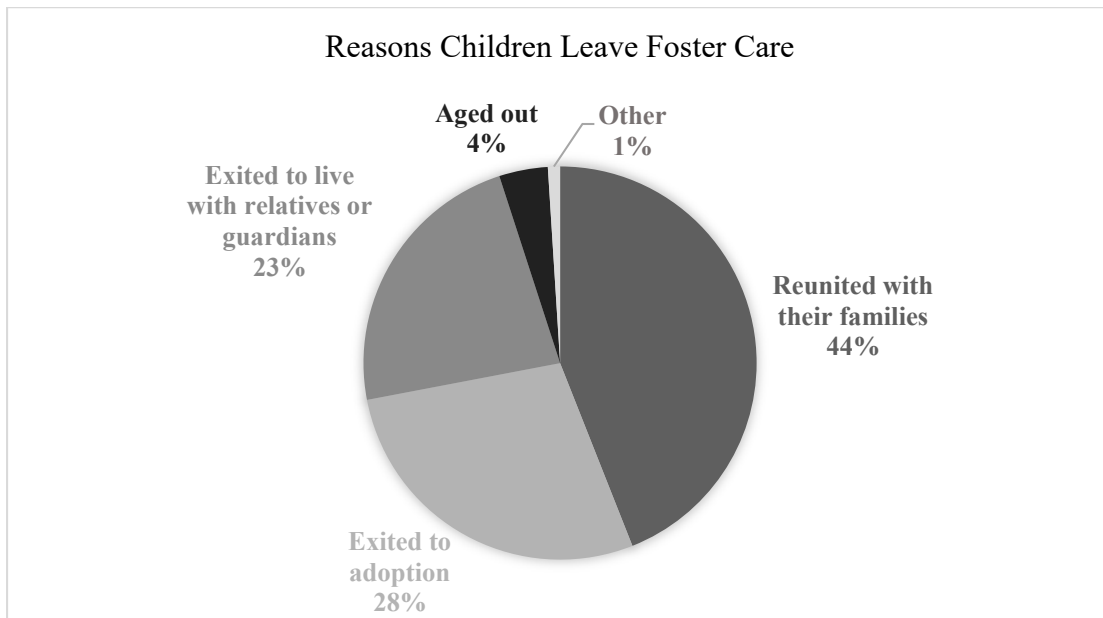


Figure 1 Reasons children leave foster care (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

**Premier Programs for FCA in Higher Education**

Many states offer support programs to students from foster care through state grants, scholarships, and tuition waivers. In North Carolina, NC-REACH is one program that supports FCA students by providing financial support to those who qualify. Several universities have also begun creating programs to support FCA students. Many of these programs are in the initial phases of implementation. Per Geiger and Beltran (2017), some of the leaders in creating support initiatives for FCA students are in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
*Premier Programs for FCA Support in Higher Education*

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Program Website</b>
<b>Arizona State University</b>	Bridging Success Program	<a href="https://students.asu.edu/foster-youth/bridging-success">https://students.asu.edu/foster-youth/bridging-success</a>
<b>California</b>	Guardian Scholars	<a href="https://promises2kids.org/guardian-scholars/">https://promises2kids.org/guardian-scholars/</a>
<b>Michigan State University</b>	FAME Program	<a href="https://fame.socialwork.msu.edu/">https://fame.socialwork.msu.edu/</a>
<b>Western Michigan University</b>	Seita Scholars Program	<a href="https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/seita">https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/seita</a>
<b>Texas State University</b>	FACES Program	<a href="https://www.studentsuccess.txstate.edu/programs/faces">https://www.studentsuccess.txstate.edu/programs/faces</a>
<b>University of Washington</b>	Champions Program	<a href="https://depts.washington.edu/omadcs/champions/">https://depts.washington.edu/omadcs/champions/</a>

Arizona State University's (ASU) Bridging Success Program offers assistance for foster care alumni during the application process and throughout the college career (Arizona State University, n.d.). The program also provides personal coaching, workshops, and dedicated staff to assist FCA students. Few resources are available on the website, and students are required to

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visit campus offices to obtain resources and assistance. In a personal interview with the program coordinator, Justine Cheung, she expressed challenges in providing a program to a mostly unknown population. Like many programs, ASU relies on FAFSA data to identify its student population. ASU's program started six years ago and is coordinated by one staff member. The program is mostly funded by institutional funds that are not recurring and relies on internal and external grants. Cheung says that she spends a significant amount of time out in the community working with group homes, high schools, and other community partners to educate their staff and students on the process of admission to higher education institutions (J. Cheung, personal communication, January 04, 2021). She says that there needs to be a high-level university champion to make the program successful, someone that can keep the spotlight on what the program is attempting to achieve. Cheung hopes that the program can grow and have dedicated staff (J. Cheung, personal communication, January 04, 2021). Cheung also says that it is essential that the program has dedicated staff to provide consistency to the students. She stresses that the FCA population generally has experienced many turnovers in support personnel throughout their journey. Many have had multiple caseworkers, social workers, and home placements. Having a dedicated person or staff that is stable helps build relationships with the students (J. Cheung, personal communication, January 04, 2021).

Western Michigan University (WMU) has a fully staffed center, The Center for Fostering Success, that supports students who have aged-out of the foster care system. The center's current director is a member of the social work faculty and researches and publishes work about students that have been in foster care. The center has two main programs, the Seita Scholars and the Fostering Success Coach Training. The Seita Scholars Program provides scholarship funds to students and has helped over 100 students graduate from college, and has a graduation rate well

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above the national average for FCA students (Western Michigan University, n.d.). The Seita Scholar's program named for John Seita, a three-time alum of WMU whose experiences of growing up in foster care were integral in creating the program (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). Participating students gain skills that allow them to succeed academically and socially. The program also offers extended support to students from foster care but do not meet the program's eligibility requirements. The program's website offers information and some interactive links, but most support is obtained by visiting campus offices.

Students are asked on the university admission application if they were in foster care on or after their 13th birthday. The question determines the student's eligibility for Michigan state funds for educational use. In a personal interview with Ronica Hamilton, Director of Seita Scholars Program, WMU has the most comprehensive program in the country (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). She stated that one of the essential things is that there needs to be dedicated staff and not part of existing work. "It is important that you are able to give this your attention, your full attention because of what they come with, the needs that they come with, the trauma that is, I think, ignited sometimes as a result of being in college for various reasons" (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). The program also has its own application process to be accepted into the program and admits between 40 and 50 students in each incoming class (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

The program provides resources such as housing over extended breaks such as winter break and spring break and assumes the cost of residence hall housing (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). Students are moved into one residence hall during these times to minimize the strain on campus resources to open and maintain multiple residence halls with utilities, housekeeping, and resident assistants. The extended-stay option is available to

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international students, athletes, and other students when needed. During these extended breaks, when cafeterias are closed, the program provides hot meals donated by volunteers as well as catered meals. The program also provides some grocery items to each student, and workers stock communal areas with bread, peanut butter, jelly, milk, and juices (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020)

When asked about advice to others who may start a similar program, Hamilton (2020) stated that support from top-level administration was essential and needed to be a "champion" that could spotlight the program and gain attention. WMU had an administrator who encouraged them to apply for any program awards and recognition at the state and national levels. Doing so gained the program national attention and further highlighted what they were doing to support students, which helped them get money in the form of new donors (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). With these donations, the program can purchase gift cards for students to use on groceries and other needed items. The donations are also used to provide welcome baskets to new students that contain bedding, towels, a planner, a small whiteboard, personal hygiene products, all presented in a laundry basket (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

The second area that the center focuses on is campus coaching. WMU created a model that is specific for supporting students that have experience in the foster care system. The model is rooted in grounded theory and research by the founding director, a social work faculty member (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). WMU uses the model to train their professionals who have dedicated positions as campus coaches, each of which has a background in mental health or experience in foster care. The WMU coaching model is about moving students through seven categories they have identified and using an assessment tool (R.

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Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020). The coaches determine whether students are thriving or struggling in the seven categories: housing, transportation, education, physical and mental health, relationships, life skills, and identity. The coaches assess and implement interventions to provide resources and skills using a cycle of teaching and learning. By goal setting with students each year in the seven domains, students create plans for what they want to accomplish each year on their path to graduation (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

At its core, the program is founded on three pillars, financial (scholarship, emergency fund, etc.), coaching (skill building, knowledge building, progressing to graduation), and community building (interactive programming, peer interaction, etc.), all of which are integral to student success (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

Texas State's FACES program strives to help FCA students by creating a campus support network available from recruitment to graduation. The program offers mentoring services and adult advocates to provide specialized support for FCA. The program's website provides links to campus resources, community resources, and a frequently asked questions page (Retention Management and Planning et al., 2019).

Michigan State University's FAME Program is housed in the School of Social Work as a community program. The program is staffed by full-time staff as well as social work interns, volunteers, and others (Michigan State University, n.d.). The program offers coaching, mentoring, monthly life skills training, and a care closet.

University of Washington's Champions program aims to recruit FCA students and help them transition to the university. The program takes special care to help eliminate the stigma of foster care on campus and recognizes the FCA student population's unique needs. The program's

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website gives background information about the program and has an application for emergency aid, but most information must be obtained by visiting a campus office (Champions OMA&D, n.d.).

The Guardian Scholars program in California is a statewide program that provides academic scholarships, mentoring support, and aims to give foster care alumni tools to be successful adults. It also boasts an 80% success rate for students (Promises2kids, n.d.). The program provides test preparation, training opportunities, scholarships, and mentoring. According to its website, the Guardian Scholars program provides over 100 students a year with scholarships (Promises2kids, n.d.).

### **Campus Context**

Western Carolina University is in Cullowhee, North Carolina, which is in rural Jackson county. The Fall 2018 enrollment report shows that 90% (10,529) of the student body were N.C. residents, and 30% (3,552) were from one of the 16 westernmost counties (WCU, n.d.-b). The population of Jackson County is just over 43,000 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). Cullowhee's population is about 9,000, not including the university (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). Jackson county is 85.3% white, and the next largest ethnicity is Hispanic which is 5.9%

Western Carolina University is a mid-sized regional comprehensive institution serving over 11,000 students (1,600 are Graduate students). WCU's student body is 78% White, and the next largest ethnicity is Hispanic at 6.75% (WCU, n.d.-a). The rural nature of the area and the institution's size means that there are limited resources, both human and financial, to support specialized programs for special populations on campus. FCA students are supported with the same resources as first-generation students, and the support is often supplemented with resources and volunteers from the community.

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FCA students are a vulnerable and marginalized group in society and every level of education. This continues when they enter post-secondary institutions (White, 2018). Society has an obligation to educate the youth of the country. Providing resources and support for FCA students is invaluable to them. Society owes these students the support beyond the system that provides a physical home and a system that is not fragmented (Allen & Vacca, 2010). High school graduates that go on to earn a bachelor's degree earn 61% more than those who do not earn a degree (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). The literature shows that approximately 23% of students in foster care will graduate from high school, and 17% will enroll in a post-secondary institution, but only 3% will earn a bachelor's degree (Hallett & Westland, 2015). Applying these percentages for known foster care numbers for North Carolina, it can be surmised that of the 420 students that exited foster care in 2019, 13 will go on to earn a bachelor's degree (See Figure 2 below). Since WCU does not identify the FCA student population, it is unknown how many FCA students are representative of the state of North Carolina numbers.

	US	North Carolina	Aged out NC 2019	WCU
# in Foster Care (2017)	443,000	10,500	420	?
Receive HS Diploma (23%)	101,890	2,415	97	?
Enroll in Post-Secondary Education (17%)	75,310	1,785	71	?
Earn a Bachelor's Degree (3%)	13,290	315	13	?

*Figure 2.* Students from foster care outcomes for 2019. Created from information from Barnow et al. and Casey Family Programs.

WCU does not have a dedicated campus program for the support of FCA students. In conversations with staff members, it was said that the FCA population tends to not seek help because they have been let down by the system and are reluctant to trust the system again, or



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they are looking for a new start and are going to do it on their own, no matter the personal cost. If students do not feel comfortable going to a resource to seek help, there is no method to provide assistance. WCU has partnered with Baptist Children's Home to create HOMEBASE with a food pantry, showers, clothes closet, computer room with free printing, and emergency apartments. According to HOMEBASE director Jim Dean, any student may go to HOMEBASE, regardless of their personal situation. A student is not required to complete any paperwork or background information. This is one of the ways they are trying to eliminate the stigma of getting assistance. They also allow their space to be used by other organizations as meeting space, which keeps the campus community up to date on what is happening at HOMEBASE.

A HOMEBASE representative attends any campus fairs to promote services that are offered. HOMEBASE sends an email to students through the MAPS office for any special events or services they are offering. These events are not exclusive to any type of student and do not single out the FCA population. In a 2020 personal interview with Dean, he complimented the working relationships that HOMEBASE has with offices on campus, including the counseling center, housing office, and the community and service engagement office (J. Dean, personal communication, December 15, 2020).

In terms of housing options, Dean said that he works with local partnerships such as Here in Jackson County, who, according to their website, helps secure emergency shelter, offers housing support programs, and assists in accessing necessary resources ("HERE in Jackson County," n.d.). Housing remains a problem for many students as they have struggled for housing in the past or are skeptical of the housing assignment they may receive for reasons such as roommate compatibility. Thus, many live off campus and therefore have housing during extending breaks such as summer break and winter break. As a result, they may choose the

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expense of stable housing over other supports such as food, health, and school supplies.

HOMEBASE may provide over 800 services to all students in a month (each day and service are counted individually) (J. Dean, personal communication, December 15, 2020). The number of services provided specifically to FCA students is unknown.

### **Causal Analysis**

It is not enough to recognize that there are low graduation rates for FCA students in higher education. The contributors to the problem need to be identified to affect a positive change. Ishikawa's (1976) fishbone diagram provides a method to perform a causal analysis of the problem of practice. An evaluation of the literature reveals multiple causes of low retention, persistence, and graduation rates for FCA students in higher education institutions. The most common themes that emerge are illustrated in the fishbone diagram below (See Figure 3). The key areas are represented by the major bones and details contributing to the area by the minor bones. The causes of low graduation rates are examined as supported by current research and observations. As indicated in the fishbone diagram, there are at least five primary contributing categories to FCA students' academic performance.

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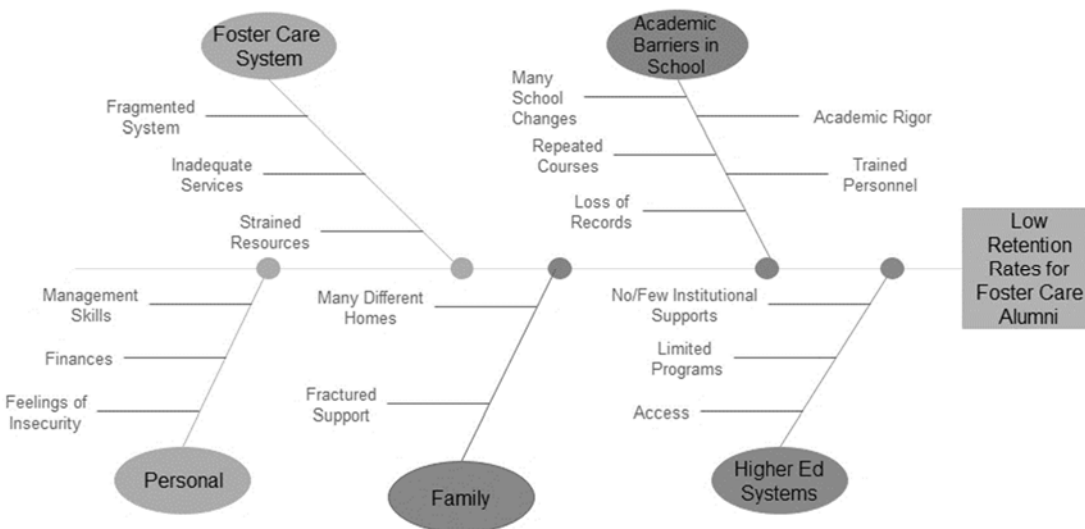


Figure 3. Fishbone diagram of causes of the problem.

### ***Beyond the Pale of the Foster Care System***

Youth in the foster care system may find themselves in a fragmented system with many moving parts. There are various agencies at work providing specialized services to many individuals. There is an agency for assisting with health care attainment, a social worker managing the case, and usually someone in the school system managing academic aspects. The foster care systems' primary goal is to protect children, leading to deficiencies in other vital areas. Multiple agencies working in isolation cause fragmentation in support for students as there is a lack of effective communication between agencies (Allen & Vacca, 2010; Burley & Halpern, 2001). A lack of consistency can mean that students often feel isolated, have difficulty adjusting, and lack self-confidence (White, 2018). Home placement changes can mean school changes, loss of friends, and loss of adult relationships. Staff at the next school may be unaware of the student's situation and the lack of stability outside of school (Allen & Vacca, 2010).

***Code Names: Identifying the Person Within***

For many students getting into college is not the most challenging part of the transition; persisting until graduation is (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013). Many FCA students are shaped by substance abuse, physical and mental health challenges, home placement challenges, homelessness, and poverty (Franco & Durdella, 2018).

College is likely the first time FCA students are on their own outside a highly structured system (Franco & Durdella, 2018). They face financial challenges and need to work to pay for tuition and living expenses, as family support is usually limited (Day et al., 2013). Many students struggle to manage money when attending college. For some, this is the first time they have had access to what is, to them, disposable money. Students may receive a lump sum of financial aid money and are expected to manage it to cover expenses throughout the semester. Students will need to budget for necessities, including housing, food, supplies, and transportation. Mismanagement can lead to insufficient funds, and with no new income flow and no way to pay for basic needs and services, FCA students may have nowhere to turn. Financial struggles are among the top reasons FCA students drop out of school (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010).

A lack of income flow is problematic for FCA students when they may not have financial support from family to supplement any financial aid received. Students who are leaving foster care may qualify for more financial aid than they receive (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). FCA students are often unaware of special scholarships and grants beyond their initial package of financial assistance. The best option for students in this situation is to have a knowledgeable campus support contact to assist before the financial crisis is unrecoverable, leading to potential academic consequences or even withdrawal from the university.

*Loaded Questions: Overcoming Academic Barriers in School*

The challenges that FCA students face when transitioning out of high school are many. Those who graduate may be inadequately prepared academically for higher education (Day et al., 2013). The academic rigor of the courses they took is not always up to the standards of higher education requirements (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). They may not be included in college preparatory courses while in high school and often receive less information about the college application process than their peers (Day et al., 2013; Franco & Durdella, 2018). Aging out of foster care while also trying to apply for college is challenging (Franco & Durdella, 2018). Many schools do not provide college resources directly to students and do not have teachers and guidance counselors to provide clear direction on the college application process (Franco & Durdella, 2018). The student can lose out on important information on the transition to the college process when the student is the responsible party for locating the accountable adult (Franco & Durdella, 2018).

FCA students may also be in a school environment that is not supportive or biased against students in a distinct population. The school staff may not be trained to assist foster care students and recognize symptoms of trauma. Regardless, the combinations of issues in schools make the transition to higher education more difficult.

Students in foster care may also attend many different schools throughout their K-12 career (Champs, 2018). Each change is another opportunity for academic records to be lost, and lost records may mean that students must repeat courses they have already taken. These changes take students away from courses that could be taken to expand their knowledge across disciplines and hinder them from becoming better prepared academically for higher education demands.

***Patchwork: Separated from Family and Numerous Placements***

For students in foster care, there are challenges for both the foster family and the foster youth. Awareness of available resources and how to access these resources is one of the most significant barriers for foster care recipients and providers. Foster care youth are a vulnerable population and need access to resources that other students may not frequently need. This can include housing over school breaks, transportation to return home during breaks, and emergency loans when they do not qualify for bank loans (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). For a student that has lived in different homes and has several foster families, support may be fragmented, or the family may be unaware of support networks available. Frequent changes in home placements, changes in schools, and changes in caseworkers lead to less knowledge of college resources (Franco & Durdella, 2018). There is a need to provide resources for preparing families for college-bound children (Franco & Durdella, 2018). Foster parents who provide stability in home life can increase educational outcomes for foster students (Franco & Durdella, 2018).

Most children in foster care maintain some type of relationship with their natural family. As many as 63% may have connections to siblings or a grandparent but not always a parent (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

***Instructions not Included: Preparation of Higher Education Systems***

Higher education institutions are also accountable for recognizing the inequalities that FCA students have experienced. Institutions need to focus on equity among students and their experiences. It is not enough to get students to camps, and institutions must also ensure access to activities and opportunities that may have financial components that would deny FCA access. Institutions need to address institutional class biases in campus culture. Gorski (2012) explains that it is essential to avoid assumptions when talking with students. Once a student decides to

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attend a secondary education institution, there will still be a need for support. The support comes in a variety of ways and from a variety of people. FCA students will need someone to help with admissions applications, financial aid applications, securing housing, and other basic needs (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). While some universities are beginning to realize the need for support programs for FCA students, very few institutions have an existing program dedicated to the FCA population. WCU has an office, Mentoring and Persistence to Success (MAPS), that is responsible for advising and providing programming for first-generation students and other populations, including students from low-income households. FCA students are eligible to receive services but must be proactive about asking for resources. Many institutions struggle to find resources and funding to create specialized programs to provide adequate programming and services to the FCA student population. There are things institutions can do to facilitate the transition to college for FCA students. Having faculty support students both inside and outside of class helps create relationships and add stability to new surroundings (Franco & Durdella, 2018). Proving interpersonal skills and soft skills training to new students helps prepare them for life outside of college (Franco & Durdella, 2018).

### **Theory of Improvement**

To improve FCA students' experience and outcomes at WCU, support structures, and resources are needed to build community and provide assistance to students. All students who want to obtain a post-secondary education must be given the resources and opportunities. FCA students are less likely to receive appropriate support and resources than their peers, causing a significant barrier to continuing their education (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Many factors contribute to the obstacles faced by FCA students. Failures in the system lead to a lack of knowledge transfer on navigating the university system, a lack of dedicated financial resources, the

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institution's scarcity of staff training, and an overall limitation of resources to support these students, increasing the need for community assistance.

*My theory of improvement holds that creating an online support site that allows students to self-identify as members of the FCA student population will connect them with physical and human resources to increase their persistence to graduation.* Based on campus support programs' research, it is probable that consolidating relevant information on resources available to support students will increase graduation rates over time (Geiger et al., 2016). The driver diagram in Figure 4 below helps conceptualize how the change idea connects to the ultimate aim (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). There are many paths to success to improve graduation rates for FCA students. The drivers are the leverage points that can change the system. The researcher held an initial meeting with stakeholders from the financial aid office, the advising center, and MAPS. The ideas that emerged from this brainstorming session centered around recording causes of lower retention rates for FCA students. Stakeholders noted that institutional support and personal advocacy are two main drivers to retention rates. The group then identified potential catalysts for change for those two drivers and what might be change ideas that would be feasible and considered a priority. The creation of a formalized process for FCA students to self-identify to the university and then be able to find consolidated campus resources and building a community were the most plausible change ideas. As WCU lacks a unit that focuses exclusively on FCA students, we lack the resources to provide in-person services similar to the exemplars described above. However, all of the exemplars pointed to providing a website pointing to resources.



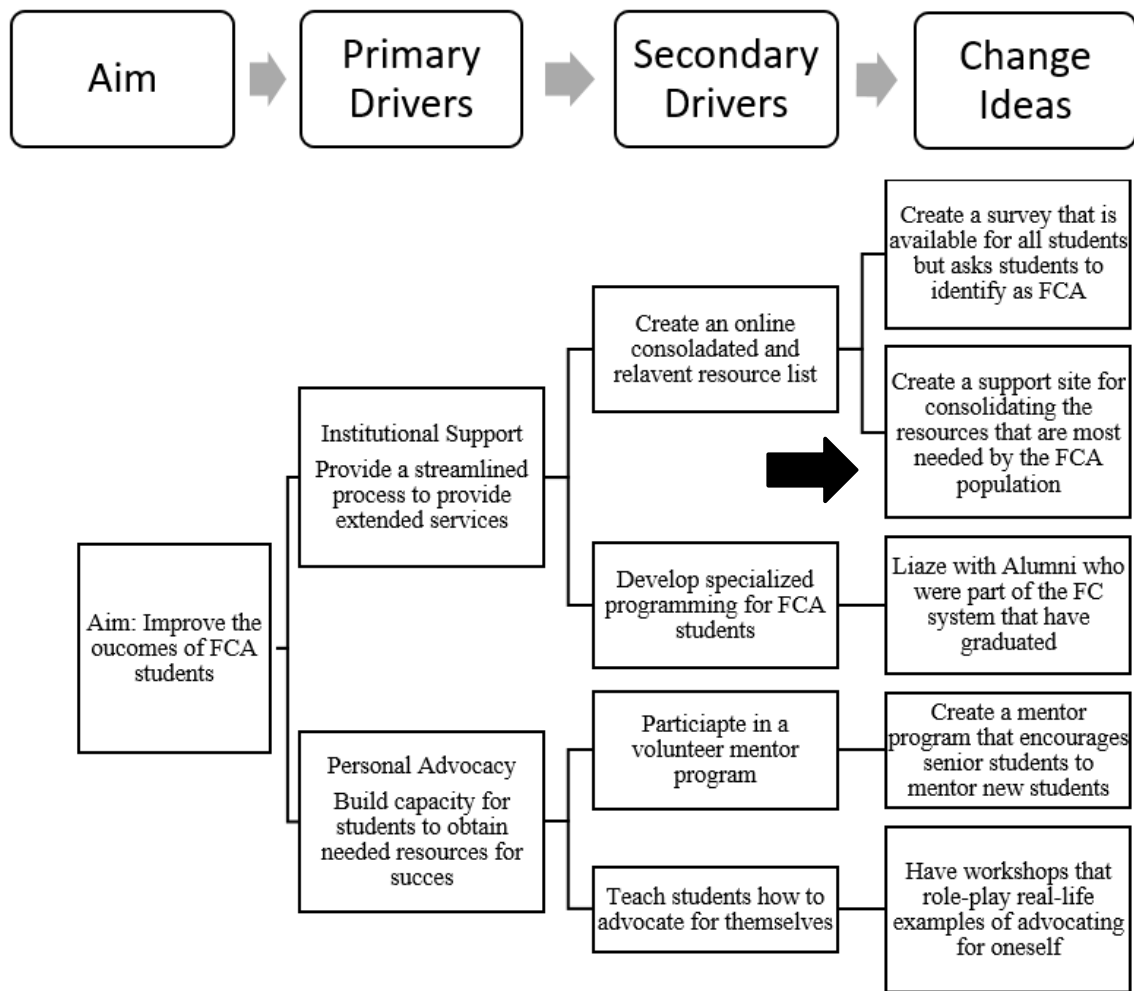


Figure 4. Driver diagram of causes of low FCA retention.

While there are many possible ways to address challenges to retention and graduation, it was not feasible to do all of them at once. The improvement initiative allowed FCA students to find resources that they needed and build a small community of peers through the use of the website and other technologies, mainly Google Chat. The website allowed students to provide feedback to the website's content, which empowered students to let the institution know what they needed instead of the university creating things they thought students needed. Google Chat allowed those that were interested in a chance to participate in anonymous online chats. They were able to use their chosen screen name and talk to peers. Only those that agreed to participate

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in the project and completed the intake survey were given access to the chat functionality. This protected the individual's identity and protected the group from exposure to anyone outside the group.

### **Literature Review of the Improvement Initiative**

A review of the current literature supports the improvement initiative of creating a support program for FCA students at WCU to build resource awareness and community building. A limited number of programs exist at other institutions comparable in size to WCU.

#### ***New Additions: The Creation of Support Programs in Higher Education***

Many student support programs have been created in higher education, but there is limited literature on these programs' effectiveness (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). The existing literature generally indicates positive outcomes for students who participate. A study of Fostering Panther Pride, a campus-based support program at Florida International University, found that students that engaged early and continued to participate in campus support programs had higher cumulative GPAs than those that did not (Huang, Fernandez, Rhoden, & Joseph, 2019).

Some programs that improve student outcomes provide early preventative services (Huang et al., 2019). These programs can be learning time management skills, learning about campus resources, and relationship building with other people (Arizona State University, n.d.).

Arizona State University's program has been reviewed several times, and in 2016, Geiger et al. published a comprehensive case study on the Bridging Success program. However, no other publications on programs noted in Table 1 above could be found that provided a publicly available evaluation of their effectiveness in supporting this population.

*Is There an App for That? Building Community with Technology*

An Australian group has created an application (app) for those that are experiencing homelessness. The app provides information on resources and services available to them (Burrows, Mendoza, Sterling, Miller, & Pedell, 2019). The study found that even when faced with losing their home, people held on to their mobile phones because they considered them a necessity, and users reacted positively to the app. Participants felt empowered, had a sense of belonging, and felt cared for in their time of need (Burrows et al., 2019). The researchers found that providing users different ways to access information built feelings of empowerment. Participants felt cared for with specialized information for their specific needs and created a sense of belonging when they felt the app was specifically designed to be inclusive. The success of this app indicates that a similar experience can be possible with WCU's FCA population.

**Improvement Initiative**

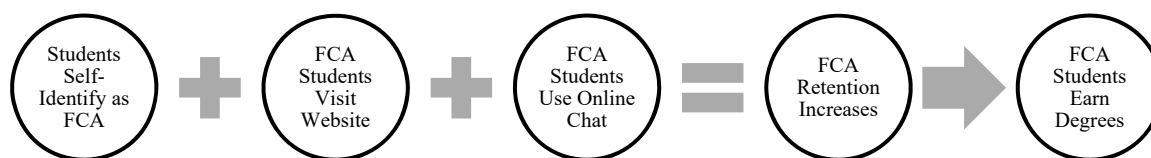
The intervention allowed FCA students to self-identify and linked students to resources available on campus and off-campus through a structured web-based support site. This intervention provided a one-stop location for FCA students to self-identify and provided consolidated access to resources commonly needed by FCA students at WCU. The exact numbers of FCA students enrolled at WCU are not readily available as they are not identified as a distinct population. The number of students eligible to receive services as first-generation is around 40% of each incoming undergraduate class. In Fall 2018, approximately 650 new and transfer students self-identified as first-generation college students (WCU, n.d.-a).

Stakeholders reviewed factors contributing to students' lower graduation rates and subsequently recognized that FCA students are not identified as a particular population. Given the lack of dedicated resources available to support this population at WCU, it was determined

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that ensuring students have access to additional resources would have the most significant potential for success under this change idea. Data that were collected through the interventions assisted in determining if allowing students to self-identify as FCA increased their use of campus resources and therefore improved retention rates for FCA. As shown in the literature review, FCA students need additional support above the support given to other students. Their unique situations require that a consolidated structured process is in place to allow students to self-identify to campus as an FCA student who needs additional support. This support must be sustainable, accurate, relatable, and easy to access. By creating an online support process, FCA students can choose to disclose their FCA status to indicate their need to be provided resources.

The initiative's model (See Figure 5) was based on the Model for Improvement concepts outlined in the Improvement Guide (Langley et al., 2009), asking the questions: What is the change trying to make? How will we know if we improved? What changes caused the improvement? (Langley et al., 2009).



*Figure 5* Improvement initiative to address the problem.

### ***Students Self-Identify as FCA***

The model indicates that creating a process for FCA students to self-identify to the university in an online format reduced the students' apprehension of visiting a campus office to disclose their status. The model predicts that the website's usage to find resources will increase FCA retention rates, ultimately leading to more FCA students earning degrees. Still, that milestone is outside the time constraints of this cycle. The improvement initiative's goal was to

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improve the retention rates and, ultimately, FCA students' graduation rates over time. Given the short timeline available, it was not possible to establish this relationship definitively. This disquisition was, in part, collecting preliminary data for the university on the FCA student population to determine if the improvement initiative has a preliminary level of validity.

### *FCA Students Visit Website*

A website was created to consolidate the known resources commonly needed by FCA students to make it possible for students to find resources at any time. The initial pages were created as a framework to serve as a starting point in consolidating information that is currently spread across campus and the community. Information is not readily accessible and is often only known to individuals after they are in need rather than being something that can be studied and referred to as a proactive guide. While working on creating the website, the researcher found it difficult to locate all available resources, especially those in the community that WCU does not oversee. The framework created was based on commonly referenced needs that emerged from the literature. It was also important that students had a mechanism for contributing to the content. If a student needed something that was not listed on the website, they could send an email to the administrator and request the information be added for other students that might have a similar need. Student involvement is integral to creating lasting systems as students are the ones with the needs this effort attempts to meet.

### *FCA Students Use Chat*

One of the challenges of this project was attempting to build a sense of community for a population of unknown students who, in some cases, wanted to remain anonymous. The initial survey asked participants to create a screen name that they would use to sign in to a controlled Google Chat. The participant's identity was only known to the researcher, and each was required

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to consent to the creation of the screen name by providing their university-issued student email address. By controlling who had access to the chat room, it was then possible to assure that the interactions were closed to the public, and if any harassment or other undesirable actions took place, the administrator could intervene. The chat room was open-ended, and any questions or conversations were viewable by all students. Other features of the Google platform were disabled as part of the initial project. Participants did not have access to their wheesupportyou.org email or the ability to invite people outside of the group to any chat rooms to limit contact with people outside the initial study.

### **Improvement Initiative Goals**

The initiative's ultimate goal is to create a consolidated support system that assists FCA students in earning degrees by first increasing the population's retention rate as the immediate goal. Creating a support structure that allows FCA students to locate and engage resources that they need and become part of a community will decrease the likelihood that a student will need to leave due to financial, academic, or other reasons. Since the initiative did not have any baseline data to compare to, part of the project was to create realistic but conservative goals. SMART (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-bound, and time-bound) goals ensure that goals are defined in ways that assessment is possible and that the plans are relevant to the project outcomes (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2011). The number of FCA students on WCU's campus was unknown other than those currently engaged with resources provided by WCU, and those numbers are only available from the specific providers. Goals for the Whee Support You program were developed as follows.

1. Recruitment efforts will lead to at least five students participating in the program

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2. Students will increase their knowledge of campus resources by 50% from the pre-assessment and post-assessment results.
3. The FCA retention rate from one semester to the next will be comparable to the university metric of 80%

### **Design Team**

A design team allows for a mix of experiences and resources that are important for successful implementation—selecting members of the design team that have intimate knowledge of the resources available for FCA students on campus and in the community allowed for the appropriate information to be available when needed. This was necessary during the planning phase as well as on an ongoing basis to ensure that correct information was and continues to be given to students and those that offer support.

The design team for this project consisted of voluntary members of various student-centered offices across WCU's campus. The staff of the MAPS office is responsible for the ongoing advisement of first-generation and FCA students. They will be in the position to directly influence the success of the implementation of the improvement initiative. The Financial Aid Office is the campus steward of knowledge of Federal Financial aid guidelines and any upcoming changes and will be able to help students understand and take advantage of the financial resources available to them. The New Student Orientation office is the student-facing office that can provide students with an overview of resources available to students in a general format.

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### **Implementation Timeline**

Initial meetings with the design team began in Fall 2019 (See Figure 6) to discuss what the individuals knew about FCA students and how they were identified on campus. The group brainstormed possible reasons that FCA students might face challenges as students at WCU.

The team members were also asked about FCA students and their academic performance and graduation rates. During the first meeting, it was determined that FCA students were not identified in a way that other campus offices knew who the FCA students were. Students self-disclose their status and needs during advising sessions with the MAPS department or individual offices when they are searching for resources that a particular office provides.

The project received approval from WCU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in May 2020. The original plan indicated that new incoming students would receive a flyer in their orientation packet about the Whee Support You Program. Since the pandemic caused face-to-face student orientation to be moved online, there was no opportunity to target that subset of students. Instead, new incoming students were included with the continuing student population instead of being recruited during the summer orientation.

Between the time approval was sought and received from IRB, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and residential WCU students were moved to online instruction and were asked to return home. The move to online instruction and lack of face-to-face contact with students meant that the original plan for recruiting students needed to be altered. Posting flyers in high traffic areas with information about the website and purpose of the project was no longer a viable option. Recruitment efforts had to rely on email requests for participation.

The university provided a list of student email addresses for students that self-identified as first-generation students as most FCA students fall into the first-generation category. The list



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contained 5,326 email addresses (1,149 freshmen, 1,092 sophomores, 1,452 juniors, and 1,093 seniors). The weekend before the first day of the fall semester, students were sent an email to their university-issued email addresses. The recruitment email (Appendix B) asked if a student identified themselves as someone that had spent any time in the foster care system. The email contained a link to a Qualtrics survey (Appendix A) that asked the student to agree to participate in the project. Participants were asked about their current awareness and interactions with campus resources. They were also asked to provide other resources they used or needed that were not present in the survey.

Participating in the project allowed the student to choose their screen name to interact with their peers in online formats anonymously. The student was asked to provide their university-issued email address to identify themselves to the researcher only. A confirmation email was sent to the email address provided to ensure that the address used was owned by the student signing up for the project. Students that chose to participate were given a login name of <screenname>@wheesupportyou.org. This allowed students to log in to Google Chat and interact with others while protecting their privacy.

	Dec-19	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21
Meet with design team	Planned	Actual												
Create website draft		Planned												
Recruitment email and flyers #1				Planned				Actual						
Pre-assessment survey				Planned				Actual						
Revise website				Planned				Actual						
Recruitment email and flyers #2					Planned					Actual				
Check registration status at fall census								Planned		Actual				
Mid-term resources survey sent											Planned	Actual		
Revise website										Planned	Actual			
Check registration status at spring census														Planned Actual

Figure 6 Implementation timeline.

### **Formative and Summative Evaluation**

The need to assess FCA students' use of and engagement with resources during the initiative's implementation was essential to determine if a positive change had occurred. Quantitative and qualitative data collection were used as well as improvement science concepts of process, outcome, and balancing measures (Langley et al., 2009). Process measures were used to ensure that the improvement initiative was implemented as designed. The process measures were the number of students that identified as FCA and participated in the project and the website usage analytics to determine website activity. The outcome measure was the percentage change in the awareness and usage of resources from the pre-assessment and post-assessment. The balancing measure would show if initiating an improvement of the outcome and process measures affect other measures negatively. The balancing measure that was monitored was the number of students that participated in the pre-assessment and post-assessment at intervals.

Formative assessment was needed to ensure that the change would not negatively affect student outcomes and attitudes. A formative evaluation allowed researchers to determine if the recruitment efforts and website usage statistics indicated positive results during the implementation cycles. If positive results were not found in self-identified student numbers or website usage statistics, it would be necessary to adjust recruitment methods and website design.

Formative assessment was performed on the identification and retention after each of the recruitment events. The number of responses providing consent to be identified and the website usage statistics showed positive results were gained. In Spring 2020, for the FCA population, two or more responses would be considered a positive influence to determine benchmark data. Any increase in the benchmark data after further recruitment was considered a positive result.

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Retention was assessed for self-identified students on the 10th day of class (census day) in Fall 2020 by determining if they were registered for classes as indicated by university data. The retained student number set a benchmark for the summative retention number.

It was essential to define what measures were evaluated during the project. The Improvement Guide describes measurement levels that determine if a change is an improvement.

The balancing measures assessed the unintended consequences of the initiatives (Langley et al., 2009). A monthly check was made on the website statistics to determine if the website was being used and if particular pages were not being accessed. Revisions were made by the design team. For example, when the website page gave information about transportation resources and that information was never accessed, the page needed to be redesigned. Because of feedback from stakeholders, this information was ultimately eliminated. Also, an influx of responses to add resources to the website could have overwhelmed the content providers if a considerable amount of time is used in the location of resources and the updating of the website. That was not experienced during this project.

The process measures ensured that the intervention was implemented as designed. A monthly check was conducted to ensure that students were self-identifying and website access statistics were as expected.

The outcome measure is the summative measure that determines how the intervention affected the results. Retention of self-identified FCA students was measured from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021.

### **Improvement Science Methods**

The use of cycles to determine change lends itself to the improvement science field of study. The Carnegie Foundation identifies six core principles that are used in improvement to

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problems of practice. The first principle is that the problem needs to be specifically determined and stakeholders engaged. The second principle is that the solution needs to work and be reliable in variable conditions. The third principle is that the system that supports the problem needs to be understood. What is unknown cannot be fixed. The fourth principle is that outcomes and processes must be measurable. Creating SMART goals assures that assessment can be performed on the process. The fifth principle is that cycles of evaluation should be completed to learn from success and failure constantly. The sixth and final principle is to work with others outside of your organization that are working to accomplish similar goals (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.). These principles are further explored in Langley et al.'s 2009 book, *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance*, which served as a guidebook for this project.

Quantitative data was available from university student records, survey data using a Likert scale, and website usage statistics from Google Analytics. Survey questions (Appendix A) asked students how much they engaged with campus resources. Survey questions also asked about students' experiences with campus support programs, including academic and counseling services. The survey questions were collected into categories of financial support, personal support, academic support, and transportation support. Open-ended questions in each category were to allow the participant to add resources that they used or needed that were not included in the survey. The survey was available as an online tool through Qualtrics and was voluntary. The survey was given at the beginning, mid-point, and conclusion of the Fall 2020 semester. Quantitative methods were used to assess the survey data to determine if students were more aware of resources after using the website and chat features. Qualitative data were available for the survey data, where participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences

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finding and using resources, as well as personal interviews with three individual project participants. The analysis occurred on a 15-week cycle, as that is the length of one academic semester, and large systems need one or more Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles (Langley et al., 2009). The PDSA cycle, as discussed by Langley (2009), supports a process of iterative changes. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle as an iterative process was also implemented (Langley et al., 2009).

The implementation and design teams evaluated the results to determine success or failure or whether an additional change made an improvement. Cycles were used to monitor the implementation of the initiative.

### **Apples to Apples: A Data Collection Summary**

Data collection was made through surveys, emails, interviews, and website statistics. The surveys and emails allowed participants to contribute to the project actively. The interviews offered willing participants the opportunity to share their individual life experiences as well as their experiences at WCU. The website statistics showed how many visits were made to the website as well as the participation level of the chat functionality. Each method provided participants opportunities to contribute their experiences and needs to the project in different ways.

#### ***Surveys***

The survey was created as a pre-assessment and post-assessment tool. Participants were asked about their awareness and use of current resources. The resources were divided into categories of personal resources, financial resources, academic resources, and transportation resources. A Likert scale was applied to each resource. The Likert scale asked the participant to choose how aware they were of the specific resource ranging from Not Aware (value=1),

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Somewhat Aware (value=2), and Highly Aware (value=3). Each participant could then be given a score for each section for the pre-assessment and post-assessment. Comparing the pre-assessment category score to the category score of the post-assessment could determine if the participants were made more aware of available resources.

### *Emails*

The website listed a specific email address, [feedback@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:feedback@wheesupportyou.org), to allow any visitor to the website to recommend additions to the resources listed. Visitors could send an email to the administrator with a needed resource. When possible and appropriate, the administrator would locate information about the resource and add the information to the website for others to use.

### *Interviews*

An interview opportunity was offered to all participants in the project. Interviews were made available both in-person and virtually. Open-ended interview questions (Appendix E) were used to provide structure to the interview but also allowed the participants to speak freely about their experiences. Any themes shared across the interviews could then be identified. Interviews would allow for a deeper understanding of the data compared to the actual experiences of participants.

### *Website*

Google Analytics was added to the website to track visits to the website. The analytics provided information on how many visits were made during the project, which pages were visited, and how many Google Chat messages were sent. The website statistics were used to determine which pages were the most used and which ones might need to be revised or

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eliminated due to lack of use. The chat information was used as summative information to see how much participants engaged during the project.

### **How it Was Done: A Methodology**

PDSA cycles were conducted on an eight-week interval to determine how the process was progressing. Progress for the improvement initiative was evaluated throughout the formative process. WCU has sixteen-week semesters, and using an eight-week PDSA cycle allowed for a pre-survey, a mid-semester survey, and a post-survey. Each survey asked participants to determine their awareness of campus resources available to them as FCA students at the beginning of the project, their awareness of resources after visiting the website at the eighth week, and finally, their awareness of resources at the sixteenth week.

### *Surveys*

The initial recruitment survey was sent to all first-generation students at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester (See Appendix A). The survey was used to collect data on individuals' awareness and use of resources on campus and in the community. The survey was comprised of questions grouped into four categories (financial support, personal support, academic support, and transportation). Each category contained several known resources and asked the survey taker to indicate their awareness of each resource as well as how often they used the resource if applicable using a Likert scale. There were open-ended questions for each category that allowed the survey taker to indicate other resources that they used or needed that were not included in the survey. The survey also gave students the opportunity to choose a screen name and share information in a group chat with other participants.

A second survey link was emailed to participating self-identified students as a check-in to determine if they were finding and using resources that they needed at the eighth week of the

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semester. If feedback indicated that resources were missing from the website, an effort was made to locate and update the website with those resources. A final survey was sent out in December 2020 to determine students' use of resources over the semester.

### *Emails*

Several email addresses were created to allow website visitors and email recipients to contact the website administrator for various reasons. [Report@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:Report@wheesupportyou.org) was indicated for reports of broken links on pages, missing information, or any topic that needed the administrator's attention more quickly. [Feedback@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:Feedback@wheesupportyou.org) was used to report any comments about the website or to request that a specific resource be located and added to the website. [Info@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:Info@wheesupportyou.org) was for any visitor to the site to request additional information about the project. The email addresses were listed on flyers and in all emails sent to recruit students as well as those who agreed to participate.

### *Interviews*

Participants in the project were emailed to request participation in a personal interview with the researcher. The interview was optional and was offered as a phone interview, web interview, or face-to-face interview. Open-ended interview questions were used to guide the session and provide consistency for each interview.

### *Website*

Additional formative assessment was performed on website efforts. The initial website information was obtained from resource providers beginning in March 2020. An initial survey was sent in August 2020 to self-identified students to ask them about resources they were aware of at that time and how often they had used each resource. The survey also contained open-ended opportunities for FCA students to provide information about other resources that should



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be included. When possible, these feedback responses were added to the website as resources to benefit the entire FCA population. Website revisions were made continually as campus and community resources changed or became available.

A website was created to consolidate resources into one location to help students find resources. A draft of the website was created in February 2020 and was published for public use in May 2020. Students could contribute to the website's content by sending an email to the website administrator, locating the resource if possible, and updating the website. Initially, the website had relatively high usage, but that declined over the course of the semester. The website address was not advertised publicly. The only way anyone would know the website address would have been from the emails to the student population to request their participation.

Google Chat was implemented as a way for FCA students to participate in community building. They chose a screen name and were given access to the chat functionality that was only available to participating FCA students. Each member was added to the Whee Support You organization in Google as a user using their chosen screen name (<screenname>@wheesupportyou.org) and was given permission to access only the chat functionality. Users were not permitted to add others to the chat from outside the organization. Users were then sent an email to the university-issued student email address that they supplied during the initial survey. Sending the email to the student's email address ensured that the address used belonged to the student that had registered with the organization. If the student receiving the email was not the registered student, that student could deny the account. Once the student claimed their user account, they could log in to Google Chat on their computer or mobile device and see the other members who had registered for the project. Within Google Chat, users could ask each other questions. The administrator could also be contacted to report any issues,

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or for students to ask any questions they may have had. This functionality was available any time from account claim to the end of the fall semester.

Google Analytics was activated for the website to help track website usage. The analytics would help identify when the website was visited and what pages were visited. Website traffic could be viewed in real-time or over a chosen time period, such as once per PDSA cycle.

### **Results**

Quantitative methods of evaluation were used to assess the improvement initiative. A summative evaluation would determine if the improvement initiative was successful or not successful. If the summative evaluation determined the improvement initiative was not successful, a decision would have to be made to adjust and perform an additional PDSA cycle or end the initiative. The next PSDA cycle would be beyond the timeline for this section of the project, into the 2021-2022 academic year.

The long-term goal was to improve FCA students' outcomes by increasing the graduation rate for students that identify as FCA. Due to this project's timeline and scope, the immediate goal of the improvement initiative was to create a consolidated place for FCA students to find resources relevant to their needs and contribute to the website's content. Participants were able to suggest content by emailing [feedback@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:feedback@wheesupportyou.org) at any time, and doing so allowed the website to evolve throughout the project.

Of the 5,000 students who were emailed, 23 self-identified as members of the FCA population.

### ***Demographic Data***

Demographic data were obtained from university data for the 23 self-identified students. Sixteen reported as female, and seven reported as male. The predominant race was white (16),

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followed by two or more races (3), Black or African American (2), American Indian/Alaskan Native (1), and one person did not disclose their race. Table 2 below, followed by Table 3 below, displays the demographic data for the participants.

Table 2

### *Sex Data for Whee Support Your Participants*

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Female	16	69.6
Male	7	30.4
Total	23	100

Table 3

### *Race Data for Whee Support You Participants*

Race	Frequency	Percent
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	4.3
Black or African American	2	8.7
Two or more races	3	13.0
White	16	69.6
Did not disclose	1	4.3
Total	23	100.0

The majority of the participants entered WCU (15) as first-year students (FR), meaning that they did not attend any other higher education institution before coming to WCU. Eight students entered WCU as transfer students (TR) and had some experience at least one other higher education institution before attending WCU.

Table 4

### *Admission Type for Whee Support You Participants*

Admit Type	Frequency	Percentage
Freshmen	15	65.2
Transfer Student	8	34.8
Total	23	100.0

Eight participants transferred to WCU from other institutions. Six participants transferred from community colleges, and two transferred from four-year institutions. One

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student transferred from an out-of-state community college in Fall 2020. All other transfer students came to WCU from other NC schools.

Table 5

Admit Term	Community College	University
Fall 2016	1	0
Fall 2017	0	1
Fall 2018	0	0
Summer 2019	0	1
Fall 2019	0	0
Fall 2020	5	0
Total	6	2

It is also important to recognize that 57% of the participants were new students for Fall 2020, the term the project was initiated. This could mean that students are more likely to engage with a program in their first semester. Those who started WCU in Fall 2020 had much higher participation than any other entry term by 40%.

Table 6

Term Started at WCU	Number of Students	Percentage
Fall 2016	1	4.4
Fall 2017	1	4.4
Fall 2018	1	4.4
Summer 2019	3	13.0
Fall 2019	4	17.3
Fall 2020	13	56.5
Total	23	100

### *Surveys*

The survey data for the pre-assessment and post-assessment were evaluated for change. An assessment was also made using the pre-test and post-test values from the resource awareness survey. While 23 students self-identified as FCA in the original survey, 19 completed both the pre-assessment and post-assessment. Since only six participants completed the mid-semester (8-

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week) survey, those results were not used in any analysis. The theory was that FCA participants would be more aware of available resources at the end of the semester and therefore have higher average scores on the post-test than the initial pre-test. Each student's average score was calculated for the pre-test, the post-test, and for each category (financial, personal, academic, and transportation). A Paired sample t-Test was performed to determine if the difference between the pre-test and post-test average score responses were significant.

Table 7

<i>Paired samples t-Test for the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment</i>								
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Post-Assessment Total	46.47	19	9.161	2.102				
Pre-Assessment Total	43.68	19	8.813	2.022				
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-Assessment to Pre-Assessment	2.789	2.720	.624	1.479	4.100	4.470	18	.000

The results of the Paired sample t-Test in Table 7 above showed that the average (mean) difference of the overall resource knowledge of participants [Mean difference = 2.789, SD = 2.720, 95% CI (1.479, 4.100) was statistically significant at the .05 level of significance (t=4.470, df = 18, p<.001). The null hypothesis, which suggested that there was no significant difference in the mean overall knowledge scores for participants in the project, is rejected.

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An analysis of the categories was also performed to determine where knowledge increases were made. Financial resource knowledge from the post-test (s3\_f) was compared to pre-test (s1\_f) category scores. The results of the Paired sample t-Test showed that the average (mean) difference of the overall resource knowledge of participants [Mean difference = .526, SD = .905, 95% CI (.090, .962) was statistically significant at the .05 level of significance (t=2.535, df = 18, p=.021).

Table 8

*Paired samples t-Test for the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment for finance resources*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Survey3-Finances (s3_f)	11.05	19	2.758	.633					
Survey1-Finances (s1_f)	10.53	19	2.875	.659					
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Survey3-Finances (s3_f)									
Survey1-Finances (s1_f)	.526	.905	.208	.090	.962	2.535	18	.021	

Personal resource knowledge from the post-test (s3\_p) was compared to pre-test(s1\_p) category scores. The results of the Paired sample t-Test showed that the average (mean)

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difference of the personal resource knowledge of participants [Mean difference = 1.053, SD = 1.224, 95% CI (.463, 1.642) was statistically significant at the .05 level of significance ( $t=3.750$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p=.001$ ).

Table 9

*Paired samples t-Test for the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment for personal resources*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper				
Survey3- Personal (s3_p)	8.32	19	2.518	.578					
Survey1- Personal (s1_p)	7.26	19	2.281	.523					
Survey3- Personal (s3_p)									
Survey1- Personal (s1_p)	1.053	1.224	.281	.463	1.642	3.750	18	.001	

Academic resource knowledge from the post-test (s3\_a) was compared to pre-test(s1\_a) category scores. The results of the Paired sample t-Test showed that the average (mean) difference of the academic resource knowledge of participants [Mean difference = .211, SD = .631, 95% CI (-.093, .514) was not statistically significant at the .05 level of significance ( $t=1.455$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p=.163$ ). The average mean for the academic section for the survey was higher

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than any other category. Little room for improvement in the academic section likely contributed to the results not being significant in the academic resource area.

Table 10

*Paired samples t-Test for the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment for academic resources*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper				
Survey3-Academic (s3_a)	18.68	19	5.628	1.291					
Survey1-Academic (s1_a)	18.47	19	5.243	1.203					
Survey3-Academic (s3_a)									
Survey1-Academic (s1_a)	.211	.631	.145	-.093	.514	1.455	18	.163	

Transportation resource knowledge from the post-test (s3\_t) was compared to pre-test(s1\_t) category scores. The results of the Paired sample t-Test showed that the average (mean) difference of the academic resource knowledge of participants [Mean difference = 1.000, SD = 1.106, 95% CI (.467, 1.533) was statistically significant at the .05 level of significance (t=3.943, df = 18, p=.001).



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Table 11

*Paired samples t-Test for the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment for transportation resources*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean					
Survey3- Transportation (s3_t)	8.42	19	2.652	.608					
Survey1- Transportation (s1_t)	7.42	19	2.567	.589					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Survey3- Transportation (s3_t)									
Survey1- Transportation (s1_t)	1.000	1.106	.254	.467	1.533	3.943	18	.001	

In the open-ended questions from the survey, the most common responses were related to the need for assistance completing the FAFSA application for financial aid and scholarships. Although the university offers several different services to help students with the process, these students seem to have missed those opportunities. A more targeted approach in contacting students that have not completed the FAFSA may be needed to reach the students.

### ***Emails***

The administrator email address for wheesupportyou.org received a limited number of responses. Two emails were received that inquired about the timing of financial refunds at the

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beginning of the semester, and one was inquiring about withdrawing from the university. The number of website visits was high at the beginning of the semester but had declined over the semester, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and competing priorities for students' time and attention. No new resources were added to the website. One email was received that asked if the website would remain active in the future because they saw that it was a student project.

### *Interviews*

Interviewing WCU students gave a qualitative perspective to what students experience as FCA students. Interviews were conducted with three participants to discern their personal stories and experiences. Each student had the opportunity to share their unique backgrounds and their educational experiences. All three students were open about their stories and did not desire to use pseudo names.

**Student 1.** Student 1, a first-year female student, was interviewed in a face-to-face setting on October 30, 2020. Student 1 entered foster care at the age of 11, and she and her older sister were placed into the care of family friends who were fostering other children. Student 1 expressed her gratitude that she and her sister could stay together and were able to live with a family they already knew. She was in foster care for just over four years and was adopted by the family at 15. She was adamant that she would not be like her mother and have a child while in high school. She expressed multiple times that not begin like her mother was her motivation to succeed. Fall 2020 was in the first semester of her first year of college at WCU. She had recently graduated from high school but was unable to attend high school graduation. She was disappointed that she could not walk across the stage to celebrate her accomplishments but stated, "I still don't have a kid. I'm still graduating high school. If I'm not walking across the stage, if I'm driving up and picking up my diploma from a mailbox, I'm still doing it. You don't

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have to have a graduation to know that you succeeded" (Student 1, personal communication, October 30, 2020). WCU's new student orientation was moved to an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Orientation is an early opportunity for students to meet peers outside of a classroom setting. She expressed she had initial fears of not making any friends, especially with classes being online for her first semester. She has found several groups on campus to interact with and said she feels good about her future. Student 1 is also a participant in the NC REACH program and is eligible to receive education funds from the program until age 21, which is when she hopes to graduate with a degree in nursing.

When asked about her interactions with campus resources and services, she was not familiar with any specific resources that she had used or needed. She was not familiar with the Mentoring and Persistence to Success (MAPS) office, supporting first-generation and FCA students. She was given information about the office and what assistance she might receive from them.

**Student 2.** Student 2, a first-semester female, was interviewed with Zoom on November 06, 2020. Student 2 was placed in foster care at the age of two, and she and her sister remained in the system for six years. They were placed together with the family that would later adopt them both. Her biological family provided no support, and she does not have any contact with them. Student 2 said that knowing that her biological family wanted nothing to do with her was her most significant barrier. It made her feel unwanted and out of place. Over time, she learned that she had a family that loved her and would do anything for her. Overcoming that barrier made her a stronger person and guided her to her educational aspirations of being a social worker. Student 2 also stated that she did most of the college admission process by herself. She was the one that made sure that everything was sent to the school to be accepted while her foster family provides

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the financial support of tuition. At first, she thought she would not attend college because her foster father passed away and her foster mother has health issues, but they both wanted her to go to college.

When asked about her knowledge of campus resources, Student 2 said that she had not used any but was aware of tutoring and counseling resources. She was also not familiar with the MAPS office and was given information about the services the office could provide to her if needed (Student 2, personal communication, November 06, 2020).

**Student 3.** Student 3, a male transfer student, was interviewed on Zoom on November 7, 2020. Student 3's experiences were, unfortunately, were more closely aligned with experiences for FCA found in the literature. Student 3 grew up on the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, N.C. His mother was 16 when he was born and incapable of raising him due to drug addiction. He was born with seven head fractures due to a difficult birth, and his mother was not capable of taking him at birth, so he went to an aunt and uncle until the age of 13 when he was placed in foster care. He was on probation from the age of eight to 16 due to behavioral problems. At 16, his record was expunged. He concedes that he was a self-proclaimed bully and trouble maker. He was expelled from school at the age of 12, and the court sentenced him to a detention center. When his sentence was served, unbeknownst to him, the process of being placed in foster care had been initiated, and after a week at home, he was sent to a foster home. He said that it was a betrayal to him that everyone gave up on him. His foster home was also on the Qualla Boundary but, no one in his family would take him into their home. After a year in a foster home, his parents surrendered all custody rights, and he became a ward of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). They did not desire to send him to another foster home of a family not associated with the EBCI. They arranged for his mother to have another opportunity to have

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custody, which did not have a positive outcome, and he "jumped to the streets." He began associating with other youth and began committing petty crimes. At age 16, Student 3 had a change of mindset and had a desire to "look nicer." He started wearing nice clothes and felt that he went from people being uncomfortable talking to him because of how he looked to others to being approachable in social situations. He credits music artists with helping him gain confidence; if they could make it, so could he. He also credits Southwestern Community College (SCC) with allowing him to attend college after narrowly graduating from high school. The support he received from SCC encouraged him to be successful and prove to himself and others that he was worth the effort. Student 3 transferred from SCC to WCU and is majoring in sociology. He sees himself as a role model to the youth in Cherokee as someone "who made it." He said he still has difficulties connecting with others because of his background and feels like he does not always fit in with other students. He does not like to compare stories with others. He said, "Everybody's got issues; I just handled mine differently" (Student 3, personal communication, November 07, 2020).

When asked about resources he had engaged with, he said the only institutional service he had used was CAPS.

Learning about the obstacles these students overcame to come out of the foster care system and successfully transition to higher education was valuable. The common theme in the three interviews was that they did a lot of the college admission preparation on their own. They were responsible for applying for schools and completing the admission process. They all said that their past had made them stronger and more determined to succeed.

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### Website

Google Analytics provides various statistics for website traffic. The most relevant data were the number of unique visits and the pages that were visited during the project. It is not possible to connect a unique visit with an individual study participant, but it is assumed that participants are the majority of those visiting the site. The website had the highest number of visits at the beginning of the semester, which was likely due to the recruitment emails and students clicking on the website link in the email. Website visits dropped during the month of September but had a slight increase in October, which was likely due to the reminder email and the start of advising for registration for Spring 2021. Advisors had been made aware of the website and indicated that they would tell students about the website and how they could use it to find resources.

Figure 7 below shows the trend of unique website visitors by month. The data indicate that reminders and publicity are needed to promote the website in order to keep it visible.



Figure 7. *Chart of unique website visits*

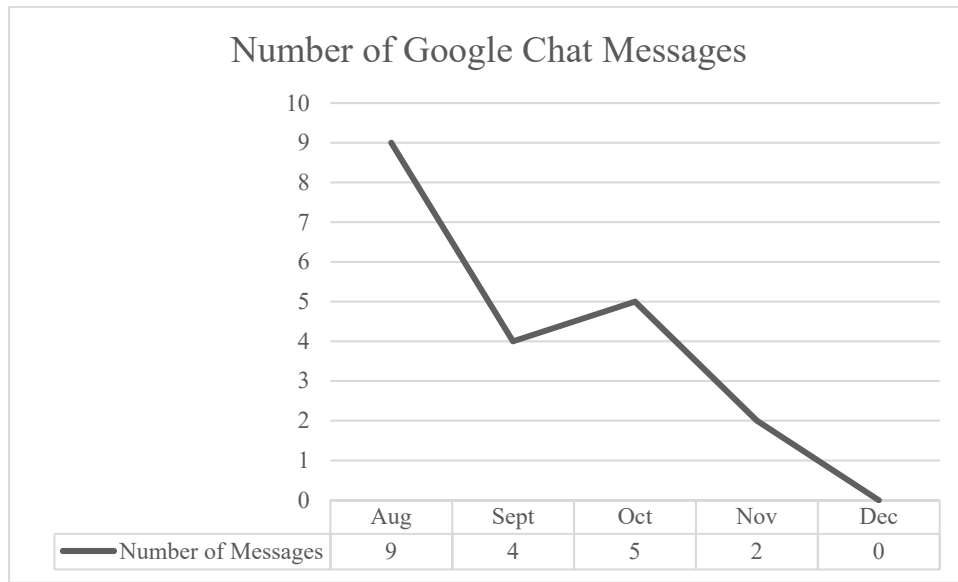
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Table 12 below shows the unique pages that visitors went to during the Fall 2020 semester. Most of the visits were to the main webpage, which is expected. Several were to the Google Chat login page and the general resource information page. As a resource website is further developed, this data could be used to determine which pages are the most visited and least visited. The least visited pages may need revision or removal from the website. The website should be used to supplement other supports that are developed. An analysis of the page visits compared to the survey results of category awareness indicates that, for example, the low number of visits to the academic's page may have been a result of already having a high awareness of academic resources available.

Table 12

<u>Page Name</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Welcome	53.05
Google-chat	17.68
Resources-home	12.20
Resources-academics	5.49
Resources-food-clothing	3.05
Resources-finances	8.54

Google Chat was implemented to allow participants the opportunity to communicate with their peers without the need to disclose their identity. By choosing a screen name, each student could participate in the online community and ask questions or talk to each other informally. The first part of the semester had more activity than any other time of the Fall 2020 semester. Six of the nine messages were about financial aid refunds and when they could expect to receive those. Other message content is unknown as those were between individual students, and only the message count was collected. Messages that were sent to or from the administrator also count in the total. The administrator answered questions about dates and deadlines whenever possible.



*Figure 8.* Number of messages posted using Google Chat

The Google Chat functionality was used by five members of the organization (four participates and one administrator).

Figure 9 below shows the number of users that participated over the semester. While the chat option was not used extensively, it could prove valuable for future participants as a way to build a sense of community and trust before revealing their identity to others. A next step might be to market this feature more extensively. An administrator would need to also participate in answering questions that arise about institutional processes and policies.



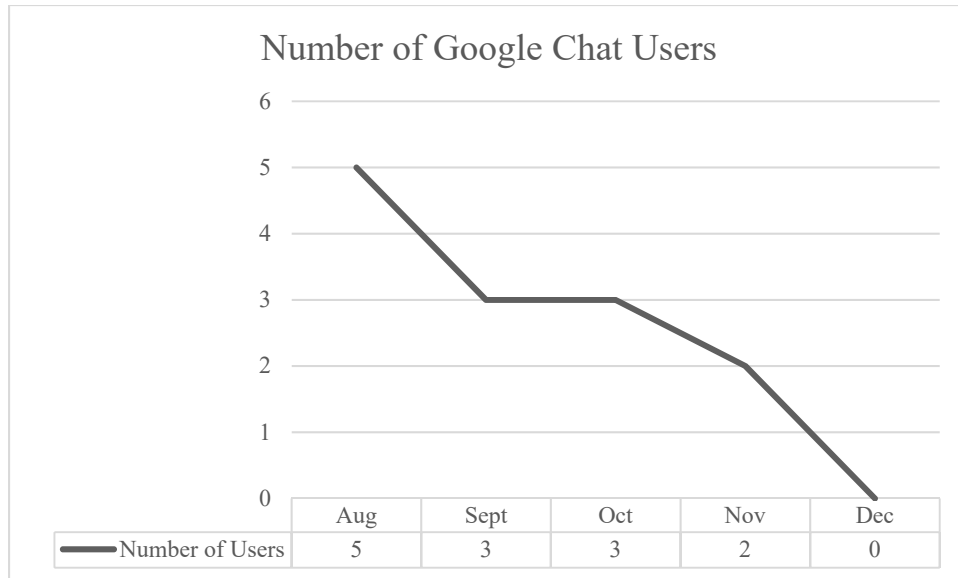


Figure 9. The number of Google Chat users by month.

**Goals and Outcomes**

Improvement was measured by comparing baseline data from the pre-survey to the post-survey results. "SMART" (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-bound, and time-bound) goals ensure that goals are defined in ways that assessment is possible and that the goals are relevant to the project outcomes (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2011).

Goals for the Whee Support You program were developed as follows.

1. Recruitment efforts will lead to at least five students participating in the program
2. Students will increase their knowledge of campus resources by 10% from the pre-assessment survey to the post-assessment survey results.
3. The FCA retention rate from one semester to the next will be comparable to the university metric of 80%

Goal one was to recruit at least five students to participate in the project. It was thought that finding five participants might be difficult given the population and their backgrounds with

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other support systems. Of the over 5,000 students that were sent emails to introduce the project, 23 students self-identified as FCA as WCU, and 19 participated in both the pre-assessment and post-assessment surveys to be included in the results.

Goal two was for students to increase their knowledge of campus resources by ten percent from the pre-assessment at the beginning of the semester to the post-assessment at the end of the semester. Table 7 above shows that the pre-assessment average for overall resources knowledge was 43.68, and the post-assessment average for overall resource knowledge was 46.47, which is a 6.84% increase. While the ten percent goal was not achieved, participants had a positive increase in resource knowledge.

Goal three was to see the retention of participants of at least 80% from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021. The university's goal is to have a retention rate of 80% for first-year students. Students who return from one semester to the next consecutive semester are more likely to graduate and become part of the three percent of FCA students that earn a bachelor's degree. On census day, the FCA population of 23 that were enrolled for Fall 2020 had 19 enrolled for Spring 2021 for a retention rate of 82.61%, exceeding the goal of 80%.

### **Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

The theory of improvement was that creating online supports would allow students to self-identify as members of the FCA population and connect them with physical and human resources to increase their persistence to graduation and lead to better lives. Students did self-identify their FCA status and participated in surveys when asked but were not active participants in the improvement initiative. It should be noted that participation might have been adversely affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the exact impact is unknown. The designed recruitment methods had to be altered from a hybrid of emails and flyers to be only email

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recruitment. Advisors may not have promoted the website as effectively as they might have in a typical semester. The website and chat features had minimal use based on the analytics.

Even though the use of the physical improvement initiatives (website and chat) were less used, the human aspect was utilized. Students were willing to complete surveys about their resource awareness and participate in interviews.

There is much that has been learned from this process. In the beginning, there was doubt that there would be enough student response to implement the initiative. Since the population was unknown, the speculative goal was to have five students participate. After sending over 5,000 emails to first-generation students, 23 responded to the initial survey identifying as spending time in the foster care system. In Fall 2020, approximately 71 NC FCA students will pursue post-secondary education (See Figure 2). In Fall 2020, eight students who identified as FCA entered WCU as new students (See Table 5 and Table 6). If these numbers are correct, WCU has 11.27% of the enrollment of NC FCA students that will enroll in post-secondary institutions. If 80% can be retained to degree completion, WCU will have helped six of the approximately thirteen FCA students earn a bachelor's degree each year in NC.

### *So What?*

The improvement initiative that was implemented sought to create ways for students to self-identify their FCA status to the university and find resources through the use of a website and create a peer community with the help of a chat feature that used anonymous screen names. While the website did have 87 unique visits initially, the website's activity was waning unless students were reminded of the website through email. There were no requests to add resource information to the website, and the use of the chat functionality was limited. Two students

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reached out about information about financial aid refunds, and one person asked if the website would remain active at the end of the semester.

The interviews indicated that students were aware of several resources on campus but were not familiar with MAPS, the office that would assist them as FCA students. The fact that all three of the interviewees were not aware of MAPS causes concern about how many students identify as FCA who did not participate in the project and are also unknown by the university.

The survey data indicated that students' overall awareness scores were still low in areas other than academics, while students made some gains in resource awareness. The open-ended questions indicated that the most needed help was with financial aid and scholarships.

Based on these findings, the use of a resource website and chat function should be used to supplement other efforts rather than replacing them. A dedicated person to recruit, manage resources, and help FCA students is necessary. A robust recruiting attempt should be performed for students who identify as FCA and are not known by the university through other means, such as visiting the MAPS office.

### *Lessons Learned*

**Lesson one.** WCU has a population of students on campus that identify as FCA, and not all are known to the university's offices that could support them. In the interview process, all three students said that they had not engaged with the MAPS, the office that would provide them assistance should they need it. Two of the students might not be identified, even if FAFSA data could be used because they receive funds from private sources and may not complete the process. The reactive nature of the current framework can mean that students do not reach out for help until it is likely too late. For example, if a student needs to take a leave of absence and stops attending classes instead of withdrawing, their academic status is at risk when they fail

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their classes. A conversation with someone who can help them understand how and why they should withdraw can keep opportunities open for the future, especially if they desire to resume their academic journey.

**Lesson two.** Students will share their stories and ask for help if someone will listen. Of the 23 respondents, ten indicated that they were willing to be interviewed by the researcher. While only three made arrangements to complete the interview process, it is promising that more were willing and would have shared if the semester circumstances had been different and more face-to-face interactions were possible. They are eager to participate in activities to help their peers and communicate when they are involved; a “nothing for us without us” mindset is appropriate.

**Lesson three.** If there is to be a successful undertaking of a process to support the FCA population fully, there needs to be a dedication at every level to do so. There must be dedicated staff whose only assignment is to work with this population (personal communication, Hamilton, November 20, 2020; personal communication, Cheung, January 04, 2021). There must be a commitment to financial resources, human resources, and community partnerships. If an institution cannot make a commitment to any of these areas, then the large-scale endeavor should be postponed as the students will not benefit. Strides can be made in other areas to support FCA students, such as continuing to market campus workshops and opportunities to students.

### ***Recommendations***

Creating dedicated programs has challenges. They require recurring money for salaries, office space, student programming, staff training, supplies, etc. Creating a specialized program for FCA students adds an additional layer of complexity due to the trauma that will likely

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accompany them. There are things that can be done short of creating a full-scale center of support for FCA.

**Recommendation one.** Find other programs that are already doing what WCU aims to do. Visit the programs that are doing these things well and create relationships with the people who support FCA students. Many schools are beginning to start programs to support FCA students, but few have been providing support long enough to know if their approach is successful. The premier programs listed in Table 1 provide a place to start making contacts. Programs such as those at WMU and ASU have been providing dedicated service to FCA students for a minimum of five years. The directors of both programs said that they had visited other programs or had coordinators of potential programs visit their site (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020; J Cheung, personal communication, January 04, 2021). Communicating with others that aim to provide similar supports builds community among such units and encourages the development and sharing of best practices.

**Recommendation two.** Based on the baseline data gathered during this process. It can be surmised that the opportunity to engage students is during their first-semester at WCU. Of the 23 participants, 57% were first-semester students, and 74% were in their first year at WCU. Even though these students had some resource awareness, it was mostly around academics. The vulnerable nature of these students' personal lives in terms of housing, food, clothing cannot be underestimated. WCU should find innovative methods to engage FCA students and be proactive about providing supports, even if it is only electronic through a dedicated website and chat capability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, almost every resource available to anyone was moved online. This shows that the transition of resources to an online format can be done, but the initiative requires proper planning and execution to be sustainable.

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**Recommendation three.** Commit to providing dedicated and sustainable resources for the FCA population at WCU. Both WMU and ASU directors emphasized the need to have dedicated and trained personnel to support FCA students (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 20, 2020; J Cheung, personal communication, January 04, 2021). It is also recommended that staff have a counseling or social work background to provide knowledgeable support that relies on different systems outside the university.

A comprehensive plan should be developed to determine the feasibility of creating a new director position that would be responsible for the recruitment and support of FCA students at WCU. The director would be dedicated to recruiting students, locating campus and community resources, engaging partners, and providing assistance to FCA students. An example of a plan for WCU can be found in Appendix G. This plan acts as a way forward in providing support to a vulnerable population of students that have needs beyond those that are provided to their peers due to their backgrounds and early independent status.

### **Conclusion**

The education aspirations of FCA students are no different than their peers. However, of the 17% that enter a post-secondary institution, only 3% graduate (See Figure 2). FCA students have a background with the trauma that is compounded with their status of being declared an independent student at age 18. Many institutions are attempting to support their FCA students with dedicated centers staffed with experienced professionals. While creating a new center dedicated to assisting WCU's FCA population may not be feasible, there are ways that support can be given to these students. WCU must be proactive in identifying the needs of students and should be prepared to provide resources quickly.

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The improvement initiative was implemented to determine if a web-based solution would increase students' ability to find resources for themselves and communicate with peers if they could do so without revealing their identity. The fact that 23 students chose to self-identify their status and were not formally identified by the university indicates that the FCA population may be larger than what is known to the university. Ultimately, the website and chat functionality were not used enough to say that these could be a replacement for a dedicated person. For the website to be successful, it needs to be publicized by students, faculty, staff, and the community. Communication with similar programs at other institutions reinforces that dedicated staff positions are needed to support the FCA population due to their unique backgrounds and needs. By creating a dedicated staff position to support FCA students, WCU can be positioned to proactively support FCA students before obstacles become too great to overcome.



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## Appendix A

### Student Resource Awareness Inventory

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#### Start of Block: Default Question Block

**Q1 Description and Purpose of the Research:** You are invited to participate in a research study regarding students with past experience in the foster care system. This study will help WCU support students by connecting students to resources and community building.

**What you will be asked to do:** Complete a survey to identify yourself as someone who has been in the foster care system. The survey will ask questions about your experiences with resources you have used and are aware of that are available to you. You will also be asked if you would like to contribute to the research by optionally participating in an interview or storytelling activity. You may also choose to contribute to a website by working with a website content provider to help create community and centralize information about resources and personal supports that students need. Optionally, you may choose to share your story with others and interact with your peers. This new website aims to consolidate information foster care students specifically find useful. You may also optionally choose to participate in an interview with the researcher to provide more information about yourself. Choosing not to participate in the interview or story telling activities will not affect your ability to participate in the survey or website development.

I AGREE to participate (1)

I DO NOT AGREE to participate (2)

*Skip To: Q2 If Description and Purpose of the Research: You are invited to participate in a research study regar... = I AGREE to participate*

*Skip To: Q10 If Description and Purpose of the Research: You are invited to participate in a research study regar... = I DO NOT AGREE to participate*

---

Q2

#### **Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study Project Title:**

Whee Support You: Creating Structured Online Support for Foster Care Alumni **This study is being conducted by:** Amelia Schlott, doctoral student, and Lee Nickles, PhD, advisor

**Description and Purpose of the Research:** You are invited to participate in a research study regarding students with past experience in the foster care system. This study will help WCU support students by connecting students to resources and community building.

**What you will be asked to do:** Complete a survey to identify yourself as someone who has been in the foster care system. You may also choose to contribute to a website by working with a

## WHEE SUPPORT YOU

website content provider to help create community and centralize information about resources and personal supports that students need. Optionally, you may choose to share your story with others and interact with your peers. This new website aims to consolidate information foster care students specifically find useful. You may also optionally choose to participate in an interview with the researcher to provide more information about yourself.

**Risks and Discomforts:** There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research. We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Internet. If some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable, you may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break or stop your participation in this study at any time.

**Benefits:** There are some direct benefits to you for participating in this research study in that you will know about campus resources that you might not have known about before. You may also gain opportunities to interact with your peers. The study may help us better understand what WCU can do to provide services and resources to other former foster care students.

**Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security\*:** The data collected in this research study will be kept confidential. Participation in research may involve some loss of privacy. We will do our best to make sure that the information about you is kept confidential, but we cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your personal information may be viewed by individuals involved in the research and may be seen by people, including those collaborating, funding, and regulating the study. We will share only the minimum necessary information in order to conduct the research. Your personal information may also be given out if required by law, such as pursuant to a court order. While the information and data resulting from this study may be presented at scientific meetings or published in a scientific journal, your name or other personal information will not be revealed. If you agree to participate in an interview or storytelling, we will collect your information through recordings, interviews, and a Qualtrics survey. This information will be stored in a restricted access folder, an encrypted cloud-based system, and a locked office cabinet. Audio recordings may be collected during this study and used to more accurately transcribe the data collected. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription. The recordings will not be shared with the general public. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of this study.

The research team will work to protect your data to the extent permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that an unauthorized individual could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. This risk is similar to your everyday use of the internet.

If you give the research team permission to quote you directly, the researchers will give you a pseudonym and will generalize your quote to remove any information that could be personally identifying.

**\*All mandatory federal, state, and local reporting requirements are in effect.**

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw, there will be no impact on your grades/academic standing, employment,

## WHEE SUPPORT YOU

access to medical care, etc. Participants may withdraw at any time by contacting the researcher via email.

**Contact Information:** For questions about this study, please contact Amelia Schlott at [alschlott2@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:alschlott2@catamount.wcu.edu). You may also contact Dr. Lee Nickles, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for this project, at [lnickles@wcu.edu](mailto:lnickles@wcu.edu).

If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227-7212 or emailing [irb@wcu.edu](mailto:irb@wcu.edu). All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

I understand what is expected of me if I participate in this research study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and understand that participation is voluntary. My digital signature shows that I agree to participate and am at least 18 years old.

Please indicate a user name to be used for your anonymous communications on the site. This will be the only user name displayed to your peers.

---

Q1. Please confirm your willingness to participate by entering your **catamount** email address. An email will be sent to e-mail address to confirm your consent to participate.

---

Q2 I would be interested in being interviewed by the researcher. (Optional and not agreeing will not affect your participation).

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q3 I would be interested in participating in online social interactions with peers. (Optional and not agreeing will not affect your participation).

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

WHEE SUPPORT YOU

Q4 Please indicate how aware you are about **FINANCIAL** resources available and how often (if at all) you have used or received the resource.

	Awareness				Received/Used Per Semester			
	Not Aware (1)	Somewhat Aware (2)	Highly Aware (3)	Never (0) (1)	Few (3-4) (2)	Often (5-10) (3)	Frequently (11-15) (4)	Consistently (16+) (5)
Financial Aid (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emergency Loans (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scholarships (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5 Please indicate how aware you are about **PERSONAL SUPPORT** resources available and how often (if at all) you have used or received the resource.

	Awareness				Received/Used Per Semester			
	Not Aware (1)	Somewhat Aware (2)	Highly Aware (3)	Never (0) (1)	Few (3-4) (2)	Often (5-10) (3)	Frequently (11-15) (4)	Consistently (16+) (5)
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

WHEE SUPPORT YOU

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religious Leader or Organization (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q6 Please indicate how aware you are about **ACADEMIC** resources available and how often (if at all) you have used or received the resource.

	Awareness				Received/Used Per Semester			
	Not Aware (1)	Somewhat Aware (2)	Highly Aware (3)	Never (0) (1)	Few (3-4) (2)	Often (5-10) (3)	Frequently (11-15) (4)	Consistently (16+) (5)
Advising Center (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mentoring and Persistence to Success (MAPS) (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SUITE 201 (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Math Tutoring Center (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing and Learning Commons (WALC) (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

WHEE SUPPORT YOU

Q7 Please indicate how aware you are about **TRANSPORTATION** resources available and how often (if at all) you have used or received the resource.

	Awareness			Received/Used Per Semester				
	Not Aware (1)	Somewhat Aware (2)	Highly Aware (3)	Never (0) (1)	Few (3-4) (2)	Often (5-10) (3)	Frequently (11-15) (4)	Consistently (16+) (5)
Jackson County Transit (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ride Share (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8 Tell us about other resources you use or need.

	Other Resources you have used and would be helpful for others	Resources that you need that you have not been able to locate
	Use (1)	Need (1)

WHEE SUPPORT YOU

Financial Resources (1)		
Academic Resources (2)		
Transportation Resources (3)		
Housing (4)		
Other (5)		

Q9 Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experiences or needs that might help other students who may need help?

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Q10 Thank You for your time!

End of Block: Default Question Block



## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email

Greetings,

The reason I am contacting you is for assistance in my research related to resources, resource access, and community building amongst a specific group of students, namely those students who have spent time in foster care.

The hope is that you would be willing to participate in a confidential survey, which will lead to the establishment of a website specifically for former students who spent time in foster care, often referred to as foster care alumni. The site aims to help create a place where you may learn about and utilize resources designed to assist them with successfully navigating the college experience.

Also, students will be able to share their stories, if willing to do so, and will be active participants in shaping and focusing the website. This will be an active, dynamic, online tool for students to use now and in the future. In addition to traditional resources, it will provide a place for advancing community building amongst individuals with similar backgrounds, offering you an opportunity to engage others who have, are, and will share in similar experiences at WCU.

You may assist me simply by completing the confidential survey found here. The survey will ask for your contact email, but only so that your participation in the survey can be authenticated. If interested in assisting more, you will simply need to indicate that on the survey. Please let me know if there are any questions you have concerning the collection of the information or how it will be used. Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Amelia Schlott  
Doctoral Student  
WCU EdD Program

## Appendix C

### Welcome Email

Greetings everyone,

I hope your first few days of classes are going well. You should have received an email with login credentials using the screenname you chose. This will allow you to use Google Chat to interact with each other. You can participate as much or as little as you feel comfortable. I have created a chatroom and a general thread. If you have a question that I might be able to help find answers to, I can also be reached in Google chat as @admin. I will try to find answers to questions, if at all possible. I hope you can take advantage of the opportunity to interact with your peers online. Your identity is confidential unless you choose to reveal it.

The website is ready for your feedback. If you have ideas for content that you think would help others with unique circumstances, please email [feedback@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:feedback@wheesupportyou.org). I will do my best to locate the information that is available and post it. This is meant to be an ongoing process, so anytime you have ideas, please email them.

I look forward to working with you all over the semester and beyond. For those of you who said you are willing to share your stories, I will be in touch later in the semester, so please stay tuned.

Thank you,

Amelia Schlott  
WCU EdD Doctoral Student

### **Helpful Links**

[www.wheesupportyou.org](http://www.wheesupportyou.org)

[chat.google.com](https://chat.google.com)

➤ download the app Google Chat Download <<https://chat.google.com/download/>>

[feedback@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:feedback@wheesupportyou.org)

Appendix D

Recruitment Flyer

# Have you spent time in FOSTER CARE?



VOLUNTARY PARTICIPANTS NEEDED\*

- COMPLETE CONFIDENTIAL ONLINE SURVEYS
- SHARE YOUR IDEAS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW SPECIALIZED WEBSITE
- POSSIBLY INTERACT WITH YOUR PEERS IN PERSON OR ONLINE
- SHARE YOUR STORY!



DO YOU HAVE TIPS TO SHARE?

ARE YOU SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION AND RESOURCES?

We are looking to create a one stop online resource center for students that have been in foster care and are now in college. We need your help to identify resources that students need that may not be offered or easy to find for others. You can choose to share your story with others, choose to add to the website content, or choose only to be part of the study.

The study will determine how WCU might help students locate resources and build a sense of community (participation is voluntary) for students that have been in the foster care system.

For more information or to participate please visit or email

[www.wheesupportyou.org](http://www.wheesupportyou.org)

[info@wheesupportyou.org](mailto:info@wheesupportyou.org)

*\*Participants must be age 18 or older*

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions

#### Interview Questions

1. What role did your family play in your school experiences?
2. What motivated you to attend college and why?
3. Was there a specific person that influenced your decision to attend college, if yes, how?
4. What or who helped you prepare for college?
5. What excited you about attending college?
6. What fears did you have entering college?
7. What do you think your strengths are and how do you think they contribute to college success?
8. How has your foster family taken steps to assist you with your college choice?
9. Describe what role your foster family played with your college enrollment.
10. Describe how your foster family assists you in preparing for school.
11. Describe your feelings about your adult transition/emancipation/exit from foster care?
12. When met with challenges with school, such as financial, emotional, etc., who do you talk to or ask for assistance?
13. Is there someone that you can depend on the most and someone that you can depend on the least?
14. Describe the housing options that are available to you.
15. Please describe your family support system (biological family/foster home) and whether you were encouraged to do well in school.
16. Tell me about your experiences (challenges/strengths) as a foster child and how you overcame barriers to academic achievement.
17. Tell me about someone, perhaps several people who helped you along the way.
18. Tell me about who encouraged you to enroll in college and when you made the decision to apply.
19. Please describe any foster care services/programs, civic organizations, university/college support services, or religious organizations that assisted you in making your transition from high school to college.
20. Please tell me about your experience in transitioning to college.
21. Please tell me how things are going since you transitioned to college.
22. Do you believe you have successfully transitioned to a university or college? If so, please describe the factors in your life that have helped you successfully transition to a college or university.
23. What are your educational and career goals?

We are now at the conclusion of this interview. Do you have any questions?

Thank you for your participation in this interview.

# WHEE SUPPORT YOU

## Appendix F

Selected pages from the Wheesupportyou.org Website



WheeSupportYou! is a student project that aims to help students who have been in the foster care system find resources to meet their social, financial, and academic needs. We also aim to identify related resources, resource access, and community building amongst a specific group of students.

The hope is that you would be willing to participate in a confidential survey, which will lead to the establishment of this website specifically for students who spent time in foster care, often referred to as foster care alumni. The site aims to help create a place where you may learn about and utilize resources designed to assist them with successfully navigating the college experience.

Also, students will be able to share their stories, if willing to do so, and will be active participants in shaping and focusing the website. This will be an active, dynamic, online tool for students to use now and in the future. In addition to traditional resources, it will provide a place for advancing community building amongst individuals with similar backgrounds, offering you an opportunity to engage others who have, are, and will share in similar experiences at WCU.

You may assist simply by completing the confidential survey found [here](#). The survey will ask for your catamount email, but only so that your participation in the survey can be authenticated. If interested in assisting more, you will simply need to indicate that on the survey.

[Register here](#)



FINANCES



HOUSING, FOOD, CLOTHING



ACADEMICS



SOCIAL



## Emergency Loans ^

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### Emergency Loans

Do you still have financial aid available? You may be eligible for an emergency loan.

- [Contact Financial Aid](#)

## Scholarships ^

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Did you complete the FAFSA? You may be eligible for [scholarships](#).

## Campus Employment v

---



Login with your @wheesupportyou.org credentials

Request to Participate in Project

Google Chat Download



## **Appendix G**

### **Framework for Creating an FCA Program**

There must be a dedication of staff and advocates who believe in the cause and understand FCA students' past experiences for a program to be effective. The dedicated staff person is more than academic support and must understand how this population's early independence intersects with their needs and experiences at WCU. A staff member should be identified whose sole responsibility is to coordinate support for FCA students. A specialist in the offices of housing, financial aid, health services, and other vital offices should be clearly indicated to the university community. The Casey Foundation has identified six elements that are necessary for developing a successful program. The core principles include designated leadership, internal and external champions, collaboration with community partners, data-driven decision making, staff support and professional development, and sustainability planning (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

A dedicated staff position of director should be devoted to identifying and guiding FCA students through the higher education process. This could include creating programming for prospective students about resources and services that WCU provides to FCA students. The dedicated person will have a comprehensive view of resources and how to access the resources. For the FCA population, having one person to go to is essential due to their complex and overlapping needs. The director will also learn the needs of the population directly for the students who are receiving the assistance.

A successful program needs champions both on campus and in the community. WCU should create a database of individuals and businesses that are strong supporters and advocates for FCA students. Having a database for reference for specific resources can be invaluable to

## WHEE SUPPORT YOU

staff who are supporting various needs of FCA students. Champions can be mentors to students and can have an influence with administrators on the needs of the population.

WCU's partnerships with organizations such as HOMEBASE are an important part of the community that supports WCU students, not only FCA students. A dedicated staff member should also contact local and state agencies who are well-versed in state policies and are familiar with resources available at a state level.

Creating a sustainable program that can support the population through change is imperative. There will need to be planning to support students through staff turnover, budget restrictions, resource changes, and other constraints. The program should have a plan to continue support regardless of changes in external factors. Data-driven decision-making can help make decisions based on collected and analyzed data about any changes that should be made.

Providing professional development to the staff is needed. The staff member should make an effort to build a network of resources beyond those locally. The network should include the staff of other FCA support programs at other institutions. Creating a broad network will keep the staff informed of what is working at other institutions and might be relevant for implementation at WCU. WCU staff should be encouraged to seek out conferences and events that directly relate to the support of FCA students. Professional development allows for the opportunity to engage colleagues in discussion while also being exposed to new ideas and trends.

Additional supports provide direct support and might be expanded at WCU to address year-round housing, financial aid, and supplemental support. These additional supports could be a target to phase 1 of a multiple-phase approach. WCU should identify dedicated housing on campus and work with campus housing partners to identify housing solutions for the FCA

## WHEE SUPPORT YOU

student population to increase housing stability and decrease the number of times each student has to move during their time at WCU.

Financial aid options should be thoroughly explored with FCA students by financial aid staff. FCA students are often independent earlier than their peers and require additional support to learn about financial aid processes. The director will work with the Office of Financial Aid staff to assist FCA students in understanding money management through direct counseling or providing other support options to build the student's financial knowledge base.

Supplemental support will also need to be provided. FCA students have access to the same programming as their peers but may need additional help. For example, an FCA student may be interested in attending a career fair but may not have appropriate attire. FCA students should be made aware of supplemental resources that may have been provided to them while they were in foster care.

As a second phase, personal guidance, community engagement, and planning for future transitions could be added. FCA students will likely need support in learning skills that are typically learned outside of the classroom and are typically learned from family members. These skills may include learning how to pay taxes or how to get a bank loan.

WCU should create an advisory board to contribute to the success of the program. The advisor board should include FCA students, campus partners, and community partners who will contribute to the program programming and supports. In the beginning, the advisory committee should be comprised of those that have direct involvement with the program objectives. The committee will review the baseline data that has been collected and determine adjustments to goals and objectives. As the program expands, representation on the advisory committee should grow as well.

## WHEE SUPPORT YOU

FCA students may need additional help with transitioning out of WCU. Career counselors should be aware of the backgrounds of FCA students to help them transition to a career. Having community contacts that can assist students in preparing for interviews and internships can help the population.

The Casey Foundation has created a framework to aid in program development (Casey Family Programs, 2010). They identify initial steps as administrative support, assign a leader, plan, assess.

The administrative aspect of planning a program includes having an individual who is the champion of the cause and is in the upper-level administration where high-level support can be provided. There also needs to be a dedicated person to act as the planner for implementation. The planner would be responsible for creating the list of stakeholders and developing a design team. The design team would work across different areas, such as financial aid, community partners, and students, to discuss and determine the program's priorities. A PDSA model should be used to develop a program properly. The cyclical nature of the model helps to determine if the implementations have a positive result. The PDSA model allows the design team to make and test small changes to the program and monitor the effects (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

Using data to make decisions will help guide the program. The institution will need to determine outcomes and how they will be measured. Objectives and timelines will need to be developed, and a strategy for collecting baseline data will need to be designed. The Wheel Support You project aimed to create a process for allowing students to self-identify their FCA status to the university in addition to other paths of identification.

## WHEE SUPPORT YOU

### **Job Description**

The Director of Whee Support You will be responsible for recruiting students who have been in the foster care system, known as Foster Care Alumni (FCA). The director will also be responsible for engaging campus and community partners for assistance in providing support for the FCA population. The director will be responsible for providing programming for FCA students by collaborating with colleges in various campus offices such as Financial Aid, Housing, and Counseling and Psychological Services. The director will serve as the point of contact for students, campus, and community stakeholders for information about the program. This position is a key member of the Student Services team.

Required qualifications include a master's degree in counseling, social work, or similar and working knowledge of the foster care system and higher education. Superior interpersonal and communication skills are required.