The Guardian Professions Program: Developing an advanced degree mentoring program for California's foster care alumni

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A B S T R A C T

Higher education continues to be an elusive social space for too many children and youth in the United States foster care system. Yet a four-year pilot project in California has demonstrated that former foster youth can surmount the detrimental effects of childhood adversity to complete their undergraduate degrees and, with additional preparation, advance to graduate degree programs. Building on the success of campus support programs throughout the state, the Guardian Professions Program (GPP) at the University of California Davis employed a research and implementation framework based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and made use of surveys, qualitative interviews and ethnographic data to develop the model. In this article the authors describe and analyze the GPP, an initiative that pioneered the use of online technology to assist seventy-four former foster youth successfully gain a level of educational success that is not often associated with this demographic. Not all children and youth who are involved in the child welfare system will have the interest or determination to pursue a university education and undertake an advanced degree. However, services and academic assistance for those students who have the aptitude can promote higher education as a path to achievement and self-sufficiency.

1. Introduction

The profile of a "typical foster youth" that emerges from the scholarly literature reveals a young adult who is more likely than their peers to be homeless, dealing in drugs, pregnant or involved in the criminal justice system (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Naccarato, Brophy, & Hernandez, 2008). Yet a more nuanced understanding yields something different. The *CalYOUTH Wave 2 Youth Survey*, a recent report assessing the benefits of extended foster care in California, notes the "diversity of aspirations and interests among young adults" and includes the very blunt acknowledgement that "averages can be deceiving" (Courtney et al., 2016). Unfortunately, this notion of an "average foster youth" persists, obscuring our understanding of a diverse group of children and youth. This label can hinder the way we interact with and respond to children who are progressing through the K-12 system, and lead to a misperception of former foster youth who are in college and pursuing degrees. This characterization is even present among advocates and is often internalized by young adults themselves.[1]

Foster youth indicate a great interest in higher education, with approximately 80% reporting a desire to earn a college degree (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016), yet barriers often stymie their achievement. Maltreatment can result in deficits in cognitive functioning and learning skills throughout the K-12 years (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002); unstable home lives cause foster children and youth to fall behind in their studies (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006; Zielinski & Bradshaw, 2006); only 58% graduate high school compared to a graduation rate of 84% for the general population, according to a study in California (Barrat & Berliner, 2013); foster youth are not encouraged to pursue higher education (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013; Pecora et al., 2003; Schwartz & Perry, 1994; Shin, 2003); they lack parents or families that can assist with the monetary demands of a college degree and are unaware of the financial aid they can receive (Emerson, 2006; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Vacca, 2008); many have not internalized the kind of self-care needed to live on their own (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009, Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Salazar, 2012; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013), and they often have emotional and behavioral issues that constrain their achievements (Watt et al., 2013). As a result, studies reveal very low graduation rates, with estimates ranging from 1 to 11%, depending

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[1] In this article we use the term "former foster youth" to describe the undergraduates who were the subject of our assistance and intervention through the GPP, both those who were still in school and those who had completed their BA or BS degree. Although recent legislation allows foster youth to stay in care until 21, this was not implemented in California until 2012 and the cohort of students we assisted were generally older.

on the age at which this educational benchmark is measured and what study is referenced (Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Pérez, 2009).[2] In contrast, among the general population, data from 2016 indicates that 36% of all 25–29 year olds have completed their college education (NCES, 2017).[3]

Given the various kinds of obstacles these young adults face (Gillum, Lindsay, Murray, & Wells, 2016; Jim Casey Foundation, 2016), providing monetary support alone is an insufficient strategy to increase graduation rates, and a growing number of universities and colleges across the US have created campus undergraduate programs that offer supportive services designed for the unique needs of former foster youth (Geiger, Day, Piel, & Schelbe, 2017). In California, over the last decade, the network of campus based undergraduate support programs has grown to include every University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) campus as well as many private institutions,[4,5] with recent state legislation awarding $15 million to an effort to increase undergraduate support services at the community college level.[6] These efforts have garnered results and many students from the thirty-three four-year California campuses have successfully completed their undergraduate studies (CCP, 2015).

In 2013, the Guardian Professions Program (GPP) was established at the University of California Davis (UC Davis) with the primary mission to increase the number of former foster youth applying to and succeeding in graduate and professional programs. The pilot project was supported by funding from the Stuart Foundation and employed a research and implementation framework that helped us quickly assess students' educational readiness, discover the obstacles to successful admission, and implement educational mentoring, materials and strategies that would support students in meeting these challenges. Over the four years, seventy-one students were assisted with admission to advanced degree programs and three additional students benefited from the program's support (Colwell, 2014, 2015, 2016; Sensiper, 2015).

In this article we explain the development of the GPP, the methodological framework for the program, our mentoring model, and how we made use of online technology. This examination also describes how we collaborated with funders, the curriculum and materials created for students, and the outcomes of our effort. Although many former foster youth are still struggling to finish high school, enroll in college and achieve their undergraduate degrees, a growing number of students in California have completed their BA and BS and shown an increasing interest in further education. The GPP is a working model that has proved successful in meeting their desires and ambitions for professional careers.[7]

2. Collaborative research to create a working paradigm for the GPP

The GPP was originally outlined in a planning grant developed

through a collaborative effort of The Stuart Foundation and the Office of Development at UC Davis.[8] The foundation was a major supporter of undergraduate campus assistance programs throughout California, and this experience led them to envision a program for graduate students that was similar — an on-campus office with a designated director/coordinator who would develop and manage various services. The Stuart Foundation's primary focus is 'system change,' and they viewed the UC Davis initiative as a trial program, that, if successful, could be adapted at other campuses. Sylvia Sensiper, PhD, first author on this article, was hired into the role of Director and tasked with administering the planning grant.

After an initial survey, however, it was clear that a distinctly different model of assistance needed to be created. Many students had an interest in advanced degrees, but these programs were not offered on the UC Davis campus. Other students did not have the necessary GPA or work experience required for a particular degree. There was a lack of understanding about specific professional opportunities associated with a graduate education, the steps to take in order to find an appropriate career path or how to meet the requirements for submitting an application. Undergraduate program directors were enthusiastic about the nascent graduate support program, yet often could not provide application assistance. Their primary focus is on ensuring that students complete their undergraduate degrees and they usually do not have the background, time or skillset to help students interested in pursuing graduate school.[9]

Acceptance into an advanced degree program is a far more selective and specific process than admission to an undergraduate degree. Freshman and transfer admissions are usually conducted through a central office, are tied to the institutional mission of a university and use holistic review, considering prospective students on the basis of their special talents, passions, and extracurricular accomplishments, as well as their test scores and grades.[10] Applicants for graduate programs, on the other hand, are assessed by faculty and faculty committees and are generally evaluated on the basis of traditional measures of academic achievement.[11] All graduate programs are highly specialized in their mission and disciplinary focus and prospective students need to choose according to their interests and expertise.

To develop a successful model, the GPP had to operate in the best

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[2] See also, National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, January 2014.

[3] This data is part of the "Educational Attainment of Young Adults" and covers 2000–2016. See: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_caa.asp

[4] California's three-tiered higher education system is comprised of the 10 campuses in the UC system, 23 campuses in the CSU system and 113 community colleges in 72 districts. Six of the UC campuses are in the list of top ten public universities and UC Berkeley and UCLA are ranked #20 and #24 respectively among the top twenty-five national universities (US News and World Report, 2017). Private schools with significant undergraduate populations have also instituted campus support programs, and USC, Loyola Marymount and Pepperdine University all have programs.

[5] Each campus has adapted their program to the local culture and campus structure. Many use the name Guardian Scholars, while other programs use Renaissance Scholars (CSU Pomona, Fresno and East Bay) and ELITE Scholars (CSU Humboldt), among others.

[6] Senate Bill 1023 (2014) provided ten community college districts with additional funds for the Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support (CAFYES) Program. In October 2017, SB 12 expanded authorization for this funding to include up to 20 community college districts.

[7] There are currently an estimated 4000 students in California's public four-year universities and many more in the state's community colleges. See Section 3: California's college-going former foster youth population for a description of students in each higher education system.

[8] The four key objectives outlined in the planning grant included: 1) Build an internal network of experts and liaisons across the UC Davis campus that could offer assistance to students including financial aid, counseling and housing as well as academic departments; 2) Establish external partnerships with all four-year campuses throughout California to promote student interest and recruitment; 3) Conduct ethnographic and survey research to further understand student interest in advanced degrees and their readiness to apply; and 4) Admit eight students to UC Davis, inclusive of students who had already participated in the Guardian Teachers Program (GTP), to form the first GPP cohort in the following fall.

[9] The planning grant survey (2013) was sent to all California four-year universities that had an existing support program for former foster youth. It asked students about their major, GPA to date, post graduate degree interest and provided a space for them to describe their career goals. This inquiry elicited 78 student responses and comments from the support program directors. Students expressed gratitude that someone was going to "help them," and directors commented that the program was a "great idea." (Assessment: Proposed Enrollment Targets for 2014 and 2016, internal report).

[10] A good description of holistic review is explained on the UC Berkeley website on a page entitled How Berkeley selects students: "The admission holistic review reflects our readers' thoughtful consideration of the full spectrum of the applicant's qualifications, based on all evidence provided in the application, and viewed in the context of the applicant's academic and personal circumstances and the overall strength of the Berkeley applicant pool." See: http://admissions.berkeley.edu/selectsstudents

[11] In a recent book entitled *Inside graduate admissions: merit, diversity and faculty gatekeeping,* University of Southern California (USC) professor Julie Posselt describes graduate program admissions and demonstrates through a careful qualitative analysis that professors may *want* to uphold the values of diversity in selecting new students, but given the constraints on their time, they usually rely on academic markers of success in order to create a shortlist of acceptable applicants —GPA, test scores, and the reputation of the undergraduate institution a student attended (Posselt, 2016). Posselt focused her study on elite universities that are ranked top in their fields, arguing that these institutions "often set a standard that others adopt to improve their standing." (Posselt, 2016: 14).

interest of the applicant and could not simply recruit for UC Davis programs. Former foster youth needed to use the standard method that all applicants to graduate programs follow and submit applications to multiple programs in order to increase their chances of acceptance (Sensiper, 2014). Applicants also needed to be coached about the implicit cultural norms that are often stumbling blocks to admission, particularly for first generation students.

The principal challenge of moving from the planning grant, an idea that was solicited by the university's Development Office and conceived as a recruitment strategy for the campus, to the implementation grant and the creation of a program that would be administered by an academic unit, was conveying information to our funders about how graduate program applications and admissions actually function.[12] The foundation was committed to assisting former foster youth but wanted to invest their funds wisely. Once we met the objectives of the planning grant, presented our research and demonstrated our methods would help increase student admissions, the foundation staff were receptive to change.

The proposed model for the implementation phase was a state-wide program that made use of online technology to mentor and coach potential applicants who were not co-located on the UC Davis campus. Applicants who were eligible for our assistance included students at undergraduate support programs throughout California and young adults who had been in foster care in California but were attending universities in other parts of the US, or had finished their undergraduate degrees and wanted to return to school.[13] Face-to-face meetings were welcomed, but the model relied mostly on web-based technologies and communication over the phone, a way of working that other organizations had shown could be successful when helping disadvantaged populations access higher education.[14,15]

2.1. Methodological concerns: Participant Action Research (PAR)

Large-scale survey research about foster children and youth, as well as those transitioning out of care, is conducted from the perspective of a state system that has in mind the well-being of an aggregate population labeled "foster youth." This has been helpful in determining the educational barriers associated with this demographic, but the disadvantage is that the collective identity is not always useful when working to understand the academic and professional potential of any single student. One of the unintentional results, in fact, is the development of supportive services that make young adults leery of receiving assistance and hesitant to follow the advice they are given (Sensiper & Fortes, 2011).

To develop a successful program, the GPP drew on a set of intertwined practices akin to a form of research-action described in the social science literature as Participatory Action Research or PAR. Kurt Lewin, one of the early founders of PAR, explains this approach as consisting of ongoing steps of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action, and then proceeding to take another step.[16]

There are various debates about the PAR approach, but it is usually agreed that the fundamental goal is to understand the world by trying to change it. As described by Kindon, Pain & Kesby, PAR is "a collaborative process of research, education and action (Hall, 1992) explicitly oriented towards social transformation" (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007: 9; see also Hall, 1992).

In addition to the survey sent during the planning grant period, and an additional survey in the first year of implementation,[17] we also gained important understandings from in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted for the Guardian Teachers Program (GTP), an ongoing pilot project in the School of Education at UC Davis. Administrators assumed a teaching credential would be a potentially attractive idea to former foster youth, but many students had other career plans and wanted to be on the receiving end of mentoring that was respectful of their own ideas and not based on their status as a former foster youth. "What I encountered were people trying to encourage me to go into certain things before I decided," one interviewee told us as she reflected on her path to law school and voiced a sentiment we heard echoed throughout all the interviews. "They would talk about certain programs [that] catered to you as a [foster youth.] Like, this would be good for you because you are a foster youth. And that's where people usually lose me."

These interview findings complemented the knowledge gained from our surveys and gave us an initial understanding of student ambitions and concerns. The research also indicated the gaps in information and the obstacles students faced in their pursuit of advanced degrees. Further research occurred through the one-on-one work we conducted as we partnered with students throughout the implementation phase of the project. These rich interactions gave us knowledge of the variety of student backgrounds and provided key qualitative insights that allowed us to assess our efforts, re-think and adjust our methods, and then develop further strategies and materials, such as our website and teaching cases.[18]

2.2. Mentoring through partnership

Our mentoring model was based on the work of two theorists in the field of human development and education whose work addresses psychological growth through collaborative efforts, motivation, and learning. The Russian researcher, Lev Vygotsky, studied early childhood development and demonstrated that a child is capable of learning skills beyond their actual developmental or maturational level with the assistance of a more proficient person. Vygotsky defined a ZPD or "zone of proximal development" as "[…] the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). Individuals learn best, Vygotsky reasoned, when they are working with others in collaborative environments and receiving instruction by more experienced peers or teachers, people who are known in his terminology as the more knowledgeable other (MKO).

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[12] Over the remaining three years, successful student admission rates prompted us to apply for other grants. We received funding from two additional foundations, The California Wellness Foundation and The May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, as well as the University of California Office of the President (UCOP).

[13] Every undergraduate program has different criteria for assisting students and our cohorts included students who had aged out of foster care as well as students who had been in foster care sometime during their K-12. Due to the GPP's inception in 2013, the program did not include students who were in extended foster care as the students we worked with were already college seniors or older, and over the age of 21.

[14] Over the four-year pilot project we worked with 46% of our successful applicants solely through web-based technologies and phone conversations and did not have an in-person meeting. Most of the other students we only met once or twice.

[15] Bloomberg Philanthropies uses a similar virtual project that operates nationwide and assists high-achieving students from low and moderate income families apply to, enroll in and graduate from top undergraduate programs. See: https://www.collegepoint.info/.

[16] "The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the means

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(*footnote continued*)

available. Frequently more fact-finding about the situation is required. If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, 'an overall plan' of how to reach the objective and secondly, a decision in regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea" (Lewin, 1948: 205).

[17] We sent a survey in the first year of the implementation grant (2014) that asked questions that were similar to the previous survey. See Footnote 9 for information about the 2013 survey.

[18] We informally called our work "anthropolicy," employing this term to highlight our focus on a people-centered policy, and our reliance on theoretical concepts found in applied anthropology (Bastide, 1974; Nahm & Rinker, 2015; Silliote, 2006). Our portmanteau also referenced the implicit cultural understandings that were needed in order to work meaningfully and collaboratively with administrators, students and organizations who often had very different missions and ideas, yet were definitely committed to a successful social transformation.

Vygotsky's theory rests on the development of a cooperative environment, and in our initial work with students, we built trust by explicitly explaining that we were "partners" in the advanced degree application process, following up with substantive actions that demonstrated our reliability. We provided practical funding, timely return of application materials and were available to talk outside of regular working hours if this was more convenient for the prospective applicant. We were aware of the literature on "natural mentors," (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016), and did our best to embody the important qualities that former foster youth have noted: consistency, trust, longevity, authenticity, respect, and empathy (Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Jr, & Tracy, 2010).

Carol Dweck's research in social psychology also informed our ideas about mentoring. Her work has resulted in a theory of "mindset" and the ways in which individuals think about success, intelligence and learning. In Dweck's well-known article, "The secret to raising smart kids," she argues that students who have a "growth mindset" will continue to work hard despite setbacks, while those who believe in innate abilities or have a "fixed mindset" are afraid of failure because it threatens their belief in their basic abilities (Dweck, 2007). Dweck's research shows that these implicit attitudes about intelligence and ability can be learned, and are dependent on the type of encouragement that is offered by parents, teachers and mentors.

Fostering a growth mindset, we provided encouragement as well as constructive critique, often asking students to re-write essays, re-take tests, prepare for interviews and initiate other tasks in addition to completing their applications. Our coaching to work hard was successful because of the established paradigm of partnership and collaboration. We certainly acknowledged the traumatic backgrounds of our students and the possible resulting educational deficits, yet the starting point for our assistance was their demonstrated resilience as well as their enthusiasm for pursuing an advanced degree.

3. California's college-going former foster youth population

Approximately 57,000 children are in out-of-home care in California and an increasing number of these former foster youth are going to college and completing their undergraduate degrees.[19] There are approximately 17,000 students within the state's community college system and the number of students matriculating at universities in the CSU system is estimated at 2500.[20] University of California information indicates approximately 1600 former foster youth among the 10 different UC campuses, although this information is self-reported and there may be more students enrolled.[21]

Former foster youth in all of California's public higher educational systems are given priority registration, with each campus having unique requirements regarding program eligibility and offering different services (Cooper, Mery, & Rassen, 2008). Some campuses offer year-round housing and others offer full tuition support. Additional financial resources are available to most students and include the Chafee Grant, provided to the state's alumni of care who were in foster care after the age of 16, the state Cal Grant and the federal Pell Grant funds, all of which do not have to be repaid.[22] Students are also able to take loans offered through the US Department of Education.

Between 2012 and 2014, the number of foster youth aging out of care in California at eighteen showed a decline of 47%, from 4527 down to 2395, a change attributed to California's Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB12) that allows youth to stay in care until the age of twenty-one (Danielson & Lee, 2010; Delgado, Fellmeth, Packard, & Prosek, 2007).[23] During the same period the number of youth remaining in care after 18 grew from 2448 to 5941 (Kelly, 2014), yet it is unclear whether this increase represents a corresponding growth in college enrollment, as there are other reasons that a youth might stay in foster care.

4. The GPP: ensuring that former foster youth present themselves as competitive applicants

Over the four years of the pilot project, our emphasis on research and adaptation led to the creation of a GPP model that revolved around the five key components described in the following subsections: (1) the *Getting Prepared for Graduate School* website, (2) the virtual mentoring process, (3) coaching to create compelling personal and professional representations, (4) the necessity of providing cultural and economic capital, and (5) remaining a point of contact for those students enrolled in graduate programs.

4.1. The website

The Getting Prepared for Graduate School website offers information specifically tailored for former foster youth and systematically covers the entire graduate school process from application to admission.[24] Each of these sections addresses needs that repeatedly arose in our surveys and during our interactions with students. The *Discovery* section of the website is for students beginning to explore possible careers and degrees or looking for pre-professional experience to help them make an informed decision. The *Timeline* section helps students consider the various tasks that are associated with finding an appropriate program and degree and the work associated with preparing their application. A third section titled, *Application Essentials* provides information about the essays, resumes and other forms of self-presentation students need to develop for their applications. This section is particularly important for former foster youth who often provide too much personal information in their written self-presentation, and includes example essays from successful students demonstrating how to contextualize the foster care experience. An additional section provides information on *Professional Schools* for prospective applicants to medical and dental school, as well as public health programs. The *Teaching Cases* section provides twelve teaching narratives that profile successful former foster youth who have gained admission to graduate school and companion facilitator guides that provide ideas about how each case might be used in an instructional setting.

4.2. Virtual and campus based mentoring

Inquiries about the GPP usually began with an email or phone call from a former foster youth who had been referred by an undergraduate program director, social worker, or peer, or who had found information about the program on the UC Davis website. The next step was a phone conversation or in person meeting with the director to establish a sense of partnership and find out more specific information about the student's academic trajectory and career goals. Due to their unstable backgrounds and tenuous network of support, former foster youth may present their desires with even more ambiguity than the normally

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[19] See: http://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/California.pdf

[20] The CSU estimate is from JBAY (personal conversation with Debbie Raucher). The figure for community college enrollment is for Fall quarter 2016 and was retrieved from the database California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Management Information Systems Data Mart. See: http://datamart.cccco.edu/.

[21] This information is from a 2016 data sheet prepared by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at the University of California Office of the President (UCOP). See: http://ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/.

[22] The $5,000 Chafee Grants are available until a recipient reaches their 22nd birthday. Federal Pell Grants and State Cal Grants are awarded on the basis of financial need. California former foster youth who attend a community college are also eligible for a Board of Governors fee waiver for course enrollment fees.

[23] California AB12 was signed into law on September 30, 2010 and took effect on January 1, 2012. This legislation implemented the provisions of the Federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

[24] See: https://prep4grad.com/

indecisive undergraduate. Helping applicants understand that *their* success was *our* success allowed us to get beyond a superficial self-presentation and allowed students to reveal their real strengths and interests. Once we had determined what kind of assistance was needed, we referred students to the appropriate resources on the website, offered scholarship funding and then scheduled a follow-up conversation to provide further support or review agreements made in the first discussion. At this point we individualized our coaching and mentoring as every student had a different history as well as professional and academic interest.

We reinforced our trust and partnership by offering resources — e.g. funding for GRE prep classes, application fees, or campus visits—, following up with emails and working with applicants in a timely manner if they asked questions or sent in essays or a resume to be reviewed. If too many students needed help simultaneously because of an approaching deadline, we always provided students with an estimated schedule as to when they would receive assistance.[25]

Once an applicant was ready to begin developing their application, we provided assistance with every aspect of the process, brain-storming ideas for essays, editing and revising statements and resumes, as well as advising applicants about requesting recommendations. We also strategized about making campus contact with the programs in which they had an interest and engaging with professors, admissions personnel and Deans. For students on the UC Davis campus we often met in person but even with these applicants, the exchange of editing and writing work was often handled by phone or electronically. Time demands for students varied from one to 2 hours each month over a four month period for a student who was applying to a Master's degree focused on college advising, to 2–3 hours each week over a period of four months for a student who was applying to dental school and needed help with his application and preparation for interviews.

The advanced degree application essay is its own "genre," as one of our literature students commented, and our goal was to help students prepare this document and other materials for each academic audience, explaining their experience, goals and aspirations within the specific disciplinary context they wished to pursue. Sometimes our coaching involved the hard truth about a student's quantitative scores if they were pursuing law or medicine and the advice that they would either have to work hard to improve or choose another meaningful professional direction.[26] At other times we had to point out to students that they had neglected to highlight some of their most important accomplishments. Many young adults with a background in foster care are still catching up to their age-group peers and have uneven transcripts that are a result of their transition to living on their own. We often suggested that students use part of their application essays or even an addendum to explain anomalies in their academic profile such as inconsistent or uneven grades, leaves of absence from school or inadequate test scores.

4.3. Personal representations: crafting statement essays and resumes/CVs

In their attempts to stand out among a pool of advanced degree applicants, former foster youth often wrote essays that related their childhood traumas, usually with the intention of making a direct connection between their academic motivation and the childhood adversity

they had overcome. In other cases, students detailed the mistreatment they faced to demonstrate resilience but neglected to describe their achievements. For example, one of our students described her mother's schizophrenia as a reason for her interest in educational policies that would help K-12 students who had a parent with a mental illness. Another detailed her mother's extensive abuse in a couple of paragraphs but then simply summarized her significant management experience in two or three sentences. These narrative strategies may have helped them access services earlier in life and might even have played a part in their undergraduate admissions, but could work against them when applying to graduate school. Faculty expectations are that the limited word count in an essay will be used to describe strengths and competencies.

When helping students with their self-representation, both with personal essays and in academic statements of purpose, the GPP encouraged former foster youth to find ways of writing about their out-of-home care that demonstrated their resilience but did not compromise their privacy or create a "red flag" for an admissions committee. Our suggestions were based on research and consultations with professors, deans and admissions personnel as well as a sensitive understanding about the ways in which the essays are read and interpreted.[27] The goal was to ensure students created holistic accounts with a focus on demonstrating their readiness for advanced degree work with minimal attention to the dramatic details of their early lives (see Chan, Calimeris, & Kabab, 2013; Thomas, 2015).[28]

We recommended starting with a recent academic accomplishment or leadership role and then including their foster care experience in a later paragraph as a way to indicate their fortitude and motivation. There was generally a shift in tone and perception as students revised their work, a change that can be seen in a comparison of the first two paragraphs of a rough draft and the final essay of the following law school statement. The first draft began with the dramatic re-telling of a foster child's trauma of separation and then recounted his academic success.

> The memory of the night I was placed in the foster care system is one that I will never forget. I still remember the screams of my mother piercing my ears when Child Protective Services took me and my brother from her arms. I was placed in a temporary emergency shelter for children where I cried and screamed until my body was numb. As I sat in that shelter, attempting to produce more tears and yells, I thought I would be reunited the next day with my parents. I was wrong; that night was just the beginning.

> I was in foster care from the age of four until I aged out. According to many statistics, approximately 1–3% of foster youth receive a bachelor's degree. To put this into perspective, I had a far greater chance of either being homeless, incarcerated, addicted to drugs, or dead, than to graduate from a 4-year university. The fact that I am even applying to law school constitutes an anomaly.

The opening of the essay certainly catches the reader's attention, but admissions committees are not interested in theatrics and the final draft began at a different point. The submitted essay immediately offers a portrait of an excellent student who has attended a first-rate university and received accolades for his academic work. Faculty committees read

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[25] We also involved successful applicants, and as they became graduate students themselves, asked them to help prospective students who were in the process of exploring similar programs and disciplines.

[26] The GRE is usually required for academic degrees yet we found that substandard scores were not always a barrier. A few of our students were accepted with minimal scores because they demonstrated excellence in another area: writing, leadership, work experience or grades. The ETS itself has cautioned that the GRE is "[…] only one element of the total picture [and] special care is required in interpreting the GRE scores of students who may have had educational and cultural experiences somewhat different from those of the traditional majority." Law degree programs and dental and medical schools, however, generally care a great deal about an applicant's test scores and students were not accepted without good scores.

[27] One professor we consulted found the inclusion of information about personal mental health or parental mental health to be a definite problem, as he could not understand why someone would provide this information. The personal statement or personal history statement can be particularly misleading for former foster youth who are often asked very intimate details about their lives, particularly when they participate in survey research. They can misinterpret the personal history statement as a request for this type of information. As a result, we often suggested students not provide specifics but simply state that their parents were incapable of caring for them.

[28] The one exception we found was with applications to social work programs and applied psychology programs that often explicitly asked for information of a more personal nature. Students still needed to be careful about how they described their past experiences and a seasoned editor was helpful.

applications quickly and the opening of this essay makes a stellar first impression, offering the reader an understanding of the applicant's foster care background only after he or she has been informed of the student's achievements.

> As a philosophy and psychology double major at the University of California, Berkeley, my particular interest was in the contemporary issue of theories of agency and differing causal explanations that accompany those theories of agency. During my junior year at UC Berkeley, I was chosen to explore this interest through the Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP), a program that promotes access to graduate education for students with disadvantaged backgrounds. I was offered a full stipend to research, develop my arguments, and present my findings in front of UC Berkeley faculty and staff.

> Being selected by SROP to conduct and present this research, and to earn my B.A. degree in philosophy and psychology at the University of California's flagship university, was a lifetime away from my inauspicious beginnings. I was placed in foster care at four years of age until the age of seventeen when I was kicked out of my foster home. I have been on my own ever since.

Following this suggested format, applicants created essays that were more suitable for an advanced degree admissions review, providing a clear picture of their aptitude and experience. This also appeared to help them internalize their personal growth and recognize themselves in new ways —as resilient achievers with unique and valuable traits and accomplishments. We suggested a similar process for resumes and CVs, asking students to categorize and highlight their research experience, leadership roles and academic awards, and include the jobs they took on to support themselves simply as a way to demonstrate their maturity.

4.4. Providing cultural and economic capital

Our mentoring process involved advising students on how to approach faculty, administrators and other professionals with whom they needed to interact in order to help them find ways to seek their own information and connections. Prospective applicants for advanced degrees must be resourceful as the rigors of graduate school demand independent thinking and action. Sometimes, however, an email from an administrator could provide information that would open a door or prompt an action that a prospective student could not do on their own. In these cases, we used the GPP's role as a statewide program with a successful track record to try and intervene.

For example, one of our students was admitted to a private university that is well-known for having a large endowment, but this student received only loans as a part of her financial aid package. We did not approach the department directly, but instead reached out to the alumni association, sending a letter that detailed the student's background as a former foster youth and citing the success of GPP associated students and the funding they had received at numerous other California universities. Although we did not find a donor through this avenue, the letter was forwarded to the academic department that had admitted the student and she subsequently received a fellowship of $10,000.

In another case, a student who had applied to three institutions had received one rejection, notification of wait list status at another, and was still waiting to hear from an additional program. We contacted the admissions Dean of that program and pointed out the student's 3.7 major GPA, something that may have been overlooked because his average GPA was lower. Our letter prompted the department to review his application, the student was admitted within the week, and the admission department thanked us for helping them see his academic potential, something that wasn't obvious with a quick appraisal.

Equally significant to providing the social capital of connections and helping our student's network, was the provision of scholarship funding

to cover the costs of applying for an advanced degree. These fees are a great barrier and every student on each of the annual surveys we administered noted this obstacle. "Being able to receive help to pay for my… GRE coursework [and] application fees was important because I could not afford it and… [I] probably would not be going to grad school if the program did not help me," one student wrote. A substantial part of the three-year implementation grant from the Stuart Foundation was allocated to funding the costs associated with applying to graduate school and we also received additional grants for these expenses.[29]

An application can range from $160 for medical school to $55 for a state teacher credential program, and students must submit multiple applications to ensure their acceptance to at least one program. Students must also pay for test fees and the associated test preparation course fees and travel costs if a student wants to visit a campus and sit in on a class, meet with students or talk with a professor. UC Davis has instituted application waivers for alumni of care, but this is not a universal practice and the total expense of applying can become prohibitive. Although the GPP was not able to cover all the costs associated with applying for an advanced degree for every student, we were able to assist on a substantial level, mitigating this obstacle of the process and also providing another level of support that reinforced the partnership paradigm.

4.5. On-going assistance for graduate students

Most graduate students are very busy and engaged with their own studies and networks of friends and family, yet we remained a point of contact for students who needed continuing support once they were enrolled in a graduate program. A few students asked for assistance in solving financial issues and one student requested educational support. We were also able to help students with grant proposals, recommendations and job applications as well as resume development. The UC Davis graduate student cohort held community dinners once every couple of months and the events were well attended. In the third year of the grant cycle, we responded to the requests for more peer contact from students at other campuses, and held GPP sponsored regional social events for those who were interested.

5. Discussion and findings

The GPP's dual mission of research and implementation changed lives and has also provided data about the advanced degree aspirations and choices of California's former foster youth. Using information aggregated from the seventy-four person cohort of GPP associated students, we examined some emerging patterns.

Sixty-five out of the seventy-four students attended a UC or a CSU with four students attending private in-state undergraduate institutions and five students completing their undergraduate degrees at both public and private universities out-of-state.[30] Most of our students, 82%, preferred staying in-state to pursue their graduate education, with twenty-nine pursuing degrees at the UCs, fifteen at the CSUs and seventeen at one of the private universities in California. Nine students chose to attend private out-of-state universities, two chose public out-of-state universities, and two students decided to go abroad. Many students cited the cost of out-of-state schools including tuition and the expenses of returning home to California for visits, as the reason for staying in state. Students who chose to pursue professional Masters also cited the need to create networks where they wish to ultimately live as an important part of the graduate school experience and a determining factor in their choice of a program.

California's educational institutions have committed to increasing

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[29] See footnote 12.

[30] Approximately a third of our students began their undergraduate studies at a community college.

the diversity of their advanced degree cohorts, and this factor is one we believe was helpful to our students (University of California Board of Regents, 2007). Former foster youth are underrepresented in graduate education, and their unique experiences as well as their resilience make them an intriguing population to many admissions committees, all of whom are seeking students with commitment and determination. California is a majority-minority state and its academic institutions have placed an increasing importance on preparing future generations for leadership roles in a diverse democracy. The state has already achieved the demographic shift predicted for the US overall by the year 2050, a diversity represented by the GPP associated students. Among the seventy-four students we assisted with their graduate school aspirations over 50% were underrepresented minorities (28% Latino, 24% Black, 1% Native American, 12% Asian, and 34% White).[31] Thirty percent of our students were male and 70% were female, and all but eight of our students were in their early to late 20′s. Of those eight, five students were in their 30′s and three students in their 40′s, this last group returning to complete their undergraduate degrees later in life and then continuing on.

A majority of our students demonstrated an interest in assisting others and approximately 57% pursued a path in the "helping professions": 12% of our students chose careers in the health fields, including medicine, dentistry, physician assistant studies, physical therapy and psychological counseling, 22% of our students became social workers, 16% chose to pursue teacher credentials, and 7% were interested in educational leadership.

Other GPP associated students chose impactful work in research, policy and business. 7% of our students were interested in public and health policy, 5% of our students were interested in planning and community development, 3% chose to become lawyers and another 4% chose to work towards their MBAs. The approximately 12% of our students pursuing PhDs have an interest in research and teaching in a variety of fields including literature, engineering, hydrology, psychology, entomology, biology and criminology. Another 12% chose to pursue Master's in biotechnology management, broadcasting and electronic communications, and engineering, among others.

The amount of funding provided to each student varied greatly depending on the programs they were applying to and the related test preparation fees, test fees and application fees, as well as whether they were working and had other sources of income. Some students also needed to re-take tests and four students re-applied to programs before they were admitted. The expenses per student ranged from $800 to $2500, the higher end reflecting the preparation test costs, test and application fees for medical and dental programs. Although these costs may seem high, it is these small capital investments that make the difference in assisting former foster youth and other disadvantaged students who are pursuing graduate degrees. It is also important to note that most of our students received grants, fellowships and teaching and research assistantships from the institutions where they were accepted for graduate degrees, an amount that collectively equaled $1,938,000 among the overall cohort.[32] Included within that total are four students who applied for and received the IV-E stipend for students in MSW programs who agree to work for the county or state for a specified time after graduation.[33]

Among the total applicants over the four-year period, 57% were seniors during the time we provided assistance and 43% had already graduated and were employed or were taking a year off to prepare for graduate school during the time period of assistance. It is noteworthy that 81% of these GPP associated students participated in an undergraduate support program.

At the conclusion of the four-year pilot project, twenty-one students had already graduated from their respective programs with sixteen completing their degrees in year three of the implementation grant. These GPP associated former foster youth include eight teachers who are working or will be working in the California public schools, three social workers, two graduates in public policy and one in health policy, one academic counselor working at a CSU, one coordinator of a foster youth support program working at a community college, an MBA employed with one of the Big Four accounting firms, one law school graduate planning on taking the California State Bar the following year, one Master in Literature moving on to pursue a PhD, one postdoctoral researcher at an Ivy League medical school and one Master in Engineering.

6. Conclusion

Low expectations are a pervasive obstacle for foster children and youth all along the educational trajectory, yet this onerous fact has not prevented many in California from making it to college, where the state's undergraduate support programs are helping an increasing number to succeed, and motivating a tenacious group who are interested in further academic and professional training. Our research shows a great desire for advanced degrees and the *CalYOUTH Wave* 2 report indicates a similar interest with 33% of youth in their survey expecting to continue beyond their undergraduate studies.

Providing support to young adults is new terrain for public policy, but assisting former foster youth who are educationally motivated is an investment we believe has promising consequences beyond each individual's personal gain. These benefits include greater diversity within advanced degree cohorts, an increased awareness among the general public that growing up in foster care is a more complex narrative than the sensational stories recounted in the media, and the creation of a network of helping professionals with a personal understanding of the hardships that foster children and youth face, a fact that many clearly state in their applications. The following essay excerpts from a recent law school applicant and a future medical professional reveal this vision:

> As a Latino male and former foster youth, I want to prove that we can be on the positive side of the law […]. By becoming an attorney, I will be able to represent this population and inspire other Latinos and foster youth to pursue an education.

> I am no more special than any other applicant, but I am unique in that I have overcome adversity and possess a perspective that will benefit others […] This is my life's desire: to obtain the knowledge and skills of a doctor in order to reciprocate all I have been given by the people in my community and beyond.

Childhood adversity does not have to remain every foster child's defining characteristic. As young adults mature, their traumas are often placed in perspective and resolved. For the former foster youth described in this article, their life experiences have resulted in a compassionate, resilient and determined approach to their education, communities and future careers. Permanency and "a forever family" have been the rallying cries of the child welfare world for many years,

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[31] The success of our students represents a departure from the findings Posselt (2016) describes and may be attributed to two factors. The majority of our students have matriculated in California advanced degree programs and their interests seem to be focused primarily on social justice oriented professional degrees and not in elite academic programs (see Garvey, 2014; The Davis Enterprise, 2015; Maier, 2015).

[32] This figure was important as it was a way to demonstrate to our funders a return on investment in financial terms.

[33] The Title IV-E Stipend Program is a national consortium of schools of social work and public services agencies. The program supports a specialized public child welfare curriculum and funding for students that commit to service in public child welfare once they have completed their degrees. The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) provides guidance, support, program structure and fiscal oversight through

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(*footnote continued*)
the master contract it holds with the California Department of Social Services, and works collaboratively with the Deans and Project Coordinators at schools where the program is offered. See: http://calswec.berkeley.edu/title-iv-e-stipend-program

but we must also ensure that all youth have a future, one that fits both their needs and abilities, and allows their unique gifts and perspectives to contribute to our wider social world. The GPP state-wide pilot project demonstrates the effectiveness of a low-cost virtual coaching model that could be adapted for use in other regions and universities.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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