



Grit, Social Support, and Academic Success of Youth Formerly in Foster Care

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Abstract

Youth formerly in foster care (YFFC) often face relational and educational challenges due to their experiences in care. To explore these issues, undergraduates at a 4-year university completed an anonymous survey about their experiences with social support, resilience or grit, and academic challenges. The sample included 47 YFFC student respondents. Compared to other students, YFFC were more likely to be single parents, financially responsible for their family, and to experience very high stress levels. Greater grit and social support ratings were related to higher GPAs among all students, not just YFFC. Recommendations include collaboration between social workers and educators to provide resources that bolster relational and resilience skills for YFFC seeking a college degree.

Keywords: Resilience, Interpersonal Skills, College Students, Out of home care, Stress

Introduction

The transition from high school to college can be daunting for most students but for youth formerly in foster care (YFFC), the challenges can be overwhelming. YFFC include individuals who aged out of the foster care system or spent a significant amount of their childhood in foster care. The foster care system works to provide stability for children whose parents are unable to care for them, yet being in foster care increases the likelihood of experiencing adverse childhood events (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, multiple placements, and disrupted relationships. These experiences can have long-lasting socio-emotional effects that can create barriers to higher education. These might be academic, personal, or financial challenges like navigating governmental hurdles to access waivers and financial support [1].

Purpose of the Study

There is a need for greater understanding of the strengths of YFFC and the areas where they may benefit from support in order to succeed academically [2]. More information about the specific barriers to retention and graduation experienced by YFFC can result in more effective institutional supports [3]. Without a solid academic

background, YFFC are less likely to complete a degree [4] which may have a direct negative impact on employment opportunities and financial stability as an adult [5]. A better understanding of the traits most related to academic retention and success will help us plan better ways to bolster those among YFFC. To gain insight into characteristics that may be helpful for YFFC to succeed in college, researchers explored YFFC ratings of grit, social support, and student grade point average (GPAs) compared with non-YFFC students.

Literature Review

Research consistently shows that college students who have been in foster care have lower performance, retention, and graduation rates compared to the general population of students. In fact, YFFC are less likely to attempt college, and if they do, they are less likely to graduate from college than any other high-risk population [4]. About 10% of foster care youth are estimated to enroll in college but only about 3% to 5% graduate with a bachelor's degree [6]. Meta-analysis of research shows several key factors related to these poor outcomes: academic difficulties, insufficient financial aid and housing, and the need for more socioemotional support [7, 8, 9]. Okpych & Courtney reported that economic issues, including the need to work full-time, and being a parent were significant barriers to degree completion by YFFC [3].

Ongoing mental health issues are also a concern, especially as youth aging out of foster care are much less likely to receive mental health services and are at higher risk of substance use as a form of self-medicating [10, 11]. A lack of emotional and social support plays a role, as only 34% of those who aged out of care reported having a long-term significant relationship with an adult mentor [10]. Such supportive relationships with adults are often necessary to build social connections that can help them succeed in all life domains, including higher education. In this article, we explore how social support and grit may be predictors of better academic outcomes for YFFC.

Social Support

Having a mentor or caring adult in a child's life, either at home, school or in the community, can function as a protective factor and

increase positive connections with others [12]. In fact, high school dropout rates decrease with adult mentorship [13] and youth are better able to face challenges and overcome difficulties in school [6]. Interviewing foster youth transitioning out of care, Blakeslee and Best examined patterns in networks of social connections for these youth [14]. Strong, stable networks were linked to a wider range of connections with adults and mentors. Interpersonal skill deficits were cited by youth as a limitation in their ability to connect with others. These deficits arise from shifting family and home placements, lack of reliable case worker support, and self-reliance instead of asking for help when needed.

Interpersonal connections can aid youth in learning to access formal and informal resources which in turn help youth develop skills that allow them to persist at challenging tasks and reach out for help when needed [15]. Pincine examined the link between academic success as measured by a student's grade point average (GPA) and relationships that support a person's feeling of belonging. Results showed that informal social support, such as taking classes with friends and being involved in extracurricular activities, was related to higher GPAs among students [16].

Further exploring the concept that social support is important to academic success, Orpana and colleagues validated a 10-item Social Provisions Scale (SPS-10) focused on perceived social support [17]. They found this scale accurately measures an individual's sense of connectedness which is a key element in positive well-being and achievement of goals [18]. Specific types of support include a sense of attachment or connection, guidance, social integration, trust through reliable alliances, and support that provides reassurance of worth. This scale could be a useful tool for social workers or academic advisors to examine young adults' connections to others and to focus on building support as needed.

For YFFC, social support often comes from the same sources as other high-risk college students, namely birth or foster families, peers, and adults who have served as mentors [19]. Unlike other students, YFFC's relationships with family are often strained or inconsistent. The same can be true of relationships with professional supporters for YFFC such as social workers and case managers, as well as academic advisors, professors, and university staff [20]. When formal supports are lacking, YFFC rely on friends and peers to provide advice, information and at times, material support. However, the ability to form close and long-lasting relationships is often negatively impacted by placement instability and tenuous relationships with caregivers [21]. While these relationships can help YFFC navigate the academic and financial challenges, past negative experiences can lead to resistance in seeking support or refusing offered help [1].

In a recent study interviewing youth aging out of foster care about resources they needed, almost three-fourths (72%) of youth highlighted the need for adults who support them by listening and being non-judgmental [22]. The surveyed youth shared the feeling that adults often assumed they knew what foster care was like for them instead of getting to know them as individuals with unique needs and perspectives. This can exacerbate the lack of trust in authority figures. When asked about social support needs, foster youth wished for adults who are willing to just listen, encourage them to learn ways to self-regulate big emotions and provide guidance when asked [23]. Katz and Geiger found that formal supports available to YFFC in high school tended to drop off when entering college, leaving youth to rely on more informal supports such as friends, peers, and coworkers/supervisors [21]. Youth in that study remarked that the supportive relationships were "versatile, long-term, unconditional, non-judgmental and trusting" [21, pg. 156]. As YFFC are less likely to have extensive social support networks, they are often left to navigate new situations on their own.

We also know foster care youth have many strengths, are resilient, and often work through obstacles alone rather than seek support in school which can be both a limitation and an asset [2]. For example, youth who enter college with more support are more likely to persevere to graduation [19]. YFFC are more at risk of dropping out if they do not feel like they have people that can help them surmount the various hurdles of financial aid, registering for classes, or buying books [21, 24]. Students who feel supported and connected, especially with staff and faculty in the college setting, are more likely to persevere, particularly beyond their first year [19]. Different types of social support serve different purposes and collectively can significantly improve outcomes. For example, informational support can help YFFC navigate financial obstacles such as applying for aid. Instrumental support can provide tangible aid like emergency money or a place to stay during school breaks [1].

Grit

The term "grit" has been used to describe a person's ability to persist with tasks and the willingness to continue to act toward goals despite challenges. YFFC often struggle with access to academic and financial resources or with interpersonal skills needed to succeed in college [7, 8, 9]. Learning to persist and finding the inner strength to overcome barriers is a skill YFFC may have developed due to their life circumstances. Duckworth et al. created a scale to measure a person's level of grit as a construct and found their scale more accurately predicted achievement in academic domains than talent or skill [25]. This is because grit includes the ability to sustain effort and focus on a goal over time [25]. Almeida et al. used social network analysis to compare the impact of grit versus social resources on academic success and found that social resources measured as formal and informal support in relationships with peers and professors at the university were even more predictive of success than grit levels [26]. Grit among YFFC does not appear to be addressed in the research literature and may be a useful variable to explore.

Materials and Methods

This exploratory study focused on characteristics that may be related to academic achievement, such as grit and social support, among a sample of undergraduate college students at a southeastern 4-year public university. The university is located in the Appalachian region and has a large population of first-generation students. The study used a convenience sample of students. The university's Office of Institutional Research (IOR) pulled a list of currently enrolled full-time undergraduate students ages 18-29 from the university registrar. The IOR emailed an invitation to all eligible students that included a link to the anonymous online survey. The researchers did not have access to any identifying information. The survey was conducted in Spring 2022 and approved as an exempt study by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as protocol #2846. Consent was implied by reading the introduction script to the online survey and agreeing to participate by continuing to the next screen to start the survey questions. Participants were instructed they could stop at any time and quit the survey by exiting the screen.

Participants were offered the opportunity to be included in a raffle for 50 participants to win a \$10 Amazon.com gift card. A new window opened after the survey responses were recorded allowing students to add an email address to enter the raffle. Participants were informed their email address was separate from the survey responses with no connection between them. The email was only used to alert randomly selected winners after the survey closed.

Measures

Survey questions included the validated 8-item 5-point Likert-style Grit-S scale [27] to measure focus on tasks and ability to persist toward goals despite challenges. The validated 10-item 4-point Likert-style Social Provisions Scale (SPS-10) was also included to

measure perceived social support among respondents [28]. The measure for academic success was a self-reported grade point average (GPA) in the student's major. Several questions were also asked about student's confidence in academics and their future academic plans.

Since this was an anonymous survey, we were not able to evaluate other more formal academic success factors matched with the sample (See Appendix 1 for the full survey.). The survey also asked students to self-report if they had ever been in foster care as a child. There are many layers to foster care experiences that are complicated to examine. This exploratory study used the yes/no variable as an indicator that foster care was a childhood experience that touched this participant's life in some way. Though the self-reported measures are simplistic in relation to overly complex topics, the limitations of an anonymous survey precluded other options.

Results

Sample

The researchers decided to exclude surveys that were less than 75% complete, resulting in a final sample of 1,040 completed surveys. The survey invitation was sent by the university's Institutional Office of Research (IOR) to 8,206 full-time undergraduate students who met the inclusion criteria, yielding a response rate of 12.7%. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS software version 19. Data analysis included frequencies, crosstabulations, and t-tests to compare responses between YFFC and non-YFFC students. Significance testing used a cutoff p-value of .05. A regression model was employed to examine the potential impact of grit, social support, and YFFC status on GPA. Comparisons between respondents' groups are provided here and in tables with YFFC percentages listed first followed by non-YFFC responses to reduce repetition of terms.

Variables	YFFC % (n=47)	Non-YFFC % (n=993)
Age Groups		
18-24	86.7	91.6
25-29	13.3	8.4
Race		
White	89.1	92.4
Black	8.7	4.9
Gender Identity		
Man	60.9	74.3
Woman	21.7	21.0
Transgender, Genderqueer, Non-binary***	17.4	4.8
Single Parent***	12.8	1.9
On-campus Student (vs. Online)	78.7	89.5
Financial Aid or Scholarships	93.5	88.3
Work Paid Job while Taking Classes	76.7	69.6
Need to Work to Pay for College	83.3	79.6
Financially Responsible for Family***	34.0	12.6
*** $p < .001$		

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents Comparing YFFC with Non-YFFC Students.

Among the sample, 4.5% (n=47) self-identified as YFFC (See Table 1). Most of the sample comparing YFFC with non-YFFC respondents were white (89.1 vs. 92.4%) or black (8.7 vs. 4.9%) and ages 18-24 years old (86.7 vs. 91.6%) or 25-29 years old (13.3 vs. 8.4%). Being ages 18-29 was part of eligibility criteria; age responses were grouped rather than collected as individual ages. Examining gender identity, most respondents identified as women (60.9 vs. 74.3%) or as men (21.7 vs. 21.0%). More YFFC (17.4%) than non-YFFC (1.9%) identified as non-binary, transgender, or genderqueer ($p < .001$).

The majority of respondents took classes on campus as opposed to online (78.7 vs. 89.5%) and had entered the university as first-time college students (61.7 vs. 70.1%). No individual class data was collected (i.e., first year student, second year). Over 65 different majors were represented in this sample (26 majors just among YFFC) with 22 students who were undecided at the time of the survey. The average GPA in their major area of study was lower for YFFC ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.7$) than non-YFFC students ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.5$, $p < .001$). [Not in table]

Most students had scholarships or financial aid to help pay for college tuition (93.5 vs. 88.3%). Youth who aged out of foster care or were adopted from foster care may be eligible to use a state-specific waiver for tuition and 21.3% of YFFC reported using this option. The majority of both YFFC and non-YFFC students worked at a paid job while taking classes (76.7 vs. 69.6%) and needed to work to

pay for college and living expenses (83.3 vs. 79.6%). More YFFC students (12.8%) were single parents than non-YFFC (1.9%, $p < .001$). Additionally, more YFFC (34.0%) were financially responsible for other family members compared to non-YFFC (12.6%, $p < .001$). When asked to rate their current levels of stress with balancing work, life, and school two-thirds (66.0%) of YFFC and over half (50.8%) of non-YFFC indicated very high stress levels ($p = .032$).

Foster Care Youth

Participants self-reported if they had spent any time in foster care as a child. Among these individuals, their average number of placements as a child ranged from 1-13 ($M = 2$, $SD = 2$). On average they spent about 5.5 years in care ($SD = 5.5$). Almost half of YFFC (48.9%) described being raised in a single parent household during middle and high school and 46.8% were the oldest child in the family. Asked about the outcome of their time in foster care, 44.4% were reunited with their parents, 26.7% were adopted, and 28.9% aged out of foster care.

Social Support

Social connectedness questions asked participants to think about who was most influential in helping with their college applications (See Table 2). More YFFC reported that no-one had helped them apply to college and that they had gone through this process by themselves (31.9 vs. 18.9%, $p < .026$). Fewer YFFC than non-

YFFC (31.9 vs. 70.7%, $p < .001$) had parental assistance or help from teachers, coaches, counselors, or school staff (14.9 vs 32.5%, $p = .006$).

Respondents were also asked who currently in their life has a positive influence on their academic goal achievement. They could choose multiple responses. The majority of YFFC (83.0%) and

non-YFFC respondents (87.8%) pointed to family members. Just over half (51.1 vs. 51.6%) noted that friends outside of college had a positive influence. Positive support from their college peers was selected by fewer YFFC than non-YFFC (31.9 vs. 52.5%, $p = .004$). The same held true for a positive influence on their goal achievement from college instructors or professors (25.5 vs. 42.3%, $p = .015$).

Variables	YFFC	Non-YFFC	
Most Influential in College Application Process	%	%	p
No-one, I did this on my own	31.9	18.9	.026
Parent	31.9	70.7	<.001
Close Relative	25.5	20.6	.256
Teacher, Coach, Counselor, Staff	14.9	32.5	.006
Friends	14.9	23.9	.103
Positive Influence on Goal Achievement			
Family Members	83.0	87.8	.222
High School Staff	25.5	20.0	.228
College Instructors, Professors	25.5	42.3	.015
College Peers	31.9	52.5	.004
Friends Outside of College	51.1	51.6	.529
Spiritual Advisors (church, temple, mosque)	12.8	12.3	.536

Table 2. Social Support Among YFFC and Non-YFFC Students Regarding Academics.

Note. Respondents could select multiple options

Support can also come from within oneself and is often measured as self-confidence levels [not in table]. Respondents were asked to rate their ability to complete a degree from not at all confident to very confident. Just over half of YFFC (53.2%) were very confident they would complete their degree compared to over three-fourths of non-YFFC (78.4%, $p < .001$). Just under half of YFFC and just over half of non-YFFC were very confident they would achieve their academic goals (42.6 vs. 57.1%). A similar percentage of both groups were moderately satisfied with their academic careers (40.4 vs. 44.2%) and slightly more YFFC planned to attend graduate

school after completing their bachelor's degree (53.2 vs. 46.0%).

Social Provisions Scale (SPS-10)

The SPS-10 measures perceived support from other people in your social network with responses to statements ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Scores are tallied for each of the ten questions with the highest possible score as 40 (very high support) and the lowest at 10 (very low support). YFFC average scores indicated lower social support ($M = 31.2$, $SD = 4.9$) than non-YFFC students ($M = 33.8$, $SD = 5.0$, $p < .001$).

	YFFC M (SD)	Non-YFFC M (SD)	p
Full Scale	31.2 (4.9)	33.8 (5.0)	<.001
Subscales			
Attachment			
-There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it. -There are people I can count on in an emergency.	6.3 (1.3)	7.0 (1.1)	<.001
Guidance			
-There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do. -I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.	6.0 (1.2)	6.5 (1.3)	.011
Social Integration			
-I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being. -I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person.	6.4 (1.2)	6.8 (1.2)	.017
Reliable Alliances			
-There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life. -There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems.	6.4 (1.3)	7.0 (1.1)	<.001
Reassurance of Worth			
-I have relationships where my competence and skills are recognized. -There are people who admire my talent and abilities.	6.1 (1.3)	6.6 (1.2)	.016

Table 3. Mean Social Provisions Scale Scores by Type for YFFC and Non-YFFC

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Total score combines all subscales for a range of 10-40 points. Each item below the total score represents a subscale of the Social Provisions Scale-10 ranging from 1-8 points.

Grit-S Scale

The Grit-S scale includes 8 questions with responses ranging from 'very much like me' to 'not like me at all'. The list of questions and responses are provided in Table 4. After reverse scoring appropriate

items, a tallied score was computed with a possible range of 8-40 points. Average scores were similar for YFFC (M = 21.5, SD = 2.9) and non-YFFC (M = 20.9, SD = 2.7).

Scale Items	YFFC M (SD)	Non-YFFC M (SD)
Setbacks don't discourage me.*	3.7 (1.0)	3.5 (1.0)
I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest	3.2 (1.1)	3.2 (1.0)
I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.	1.7 (0.8)	1.7 (0.8)
I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.	3.2 (1.0)	3.1 (1.0)
New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.	2.1 (1.0)	2.0 (0.8)
I am a hard worker.*	2.6 (1.0)	2.5 (1.1)
I finish whatever I begin.*	2.6 (1.2)	2.6 (1.2)
I am diligent.*	2.3 (0.9)	2.4 (0.9)

Table 4. Grit-S Scores Comparing YFFC with Non-YFFC

Note. *Items are reverse scored

Pearson Correlation	GPA	Race	Gender Identity	Age	Single Parent	Social Support	Grit	YFFC Status
GPA	1.00	.10***	-.001	-.07*	.05	.17***	-.10***	-.14***
Race	.10***	1.00	.04	-.04	.08	-.003	.02	-.03
Gender Identity	-.001	.04	1.00	-.04	.04	.06*	.000	.04
Age	-.07*	-.04	-.04	1.00	-.27	-.03	-.03	.04
Single Parent	.05	.08**	.04	-.27	1.00	.03	.04	-.14***
Social Support	.17***	-.003	.06*	-.03	.04	1.00	-.19***	-.11***
Grit	-.10***	.02	.000	-.03	.03	-.19***	1.00	.06*
YFFC Status	-.14***	-.03	.04	.04	-.14	-.11***	.06*	1.00

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 5. Correlations Summary (n=959)

Regression

A linear regression model was created to examine the relationship between the dependent variable of GPA with the predictor variables of grit, social support, and YFFC status. Control variables were entered first including gender identity (man, woman, transgender/nonbinary/ genderqueer), race (white, other), age group (18-24 or 25-29), and single parent status (yes, no, no children). The second model added social provisions scale scores. The third model added grit scale scores. The fourth model added experience in foster care status (yes/no).

Results of the regression model are displayed in Table 6. The R² values incrementally increase in each model and reflect how much variance in GPA could be related to each predictor variable (i.e., grit, social support, YFFC status). This means as we add each independent

variable into our model there is slightly more variation in GPA. Model 2 enters grit scores as the predictor variable. This reflects a 16% increase in GPA. Model 3 adds social support scores which increases the variance to 22%. Model 4 includes YFFC status as a predictor and this increases the explained variance in GPA to 25%.

Each model is statistically significant showing a good fit with the terms. The regression model indicated social support, grit and YFFC status could help explain 25% of the variance in GPAs. Together as a group these variables appear to influence GPA more than individually. With the small variance represented in this model, it would be beneficial to find a more robust measure of academic achievement to include in future studies, as well as a greater sample of YFFC. Adding specific data from academic records for example could help provide more insight.

Variable	b	Beta	T	95% CI	p
Model 1					
Constant	3.30	--	20.78	[2.99, 3.62]	<.001
Model 2					
Constant	3.74	--	18.07	[3.34, 4.12]	<.001
Grit	-.02	-.12	-3.27	[-.03, -.01]	<.001
Model 3					
Constant	3.09	--	14.05	[2.71, 3.59]	<.001
Grit	-.02	-.08	-2.35	[-.03, -.002]	.02
Social Support	.02	.15	4.76	[.01, .02]	<.001
Model 4					
Constant	3.16	--	12.81	[2.74, 3.61]	<.001
Grit	-.01	-.07	-2.22	[-.03, -.002]	.03
Social Support	.02	.14	4.41	[.008, .02]	<.001
YFFC Status	-.27	-.11	-3.38	[-.43, -.12]	<.001

Table 6. Multiple Regression Model for Variables Predicting GPA (n = 959)

Note. Control variables include age, gender identity, race, and single parent status.

Model 1: $F = 3.65$, $p = .006$; $df = 4, 954$; $R = .12$; $R^2 = .02$; adjusted $R^2 = .01$

Model 2: $F = 5.09$, $p < .001$; $df = 5, 953$; $R = .16$; $R^2 = .03$; adjusted $R^2 = .02$

Model 3: $F = 8.12$, $p < .001$; $df = 6, 952$; $R = .22$; $R^2 = .05$; adjusted $R^2 = .04$

Model 4: $F = 8.65$, $p < .001$; $df = 7, 951$; $R = .25$; $R^2 = .06$; adjusted $R^2 = .05$

Discussion

The data from this study found similar levels of resilience measured as grit scores between both groups of students, though YFFC had significantly lower GPAs and social support levels. The data also reflect possible connections between grit, social support, and increased GPAs. This was a very small pilot study sample of YFFC, but it hints at the importance of improving interpersonal skills to support positive relationships. These are skills that can be learned and improved with practice. Exploring the impact of providing YFFC with interpersonal skills training to see if there are beneficial increases in grit and social support is recommended. Building relational and emotional coping skills as well as grit to persist with the difficulties of college might prove an essential part of supporting YFFC as they transition from care to living as a young adult at college.

Another area of interest from this sample of students is youth who identify as LGBTQIA, particularly non-binary, genderqueer, or transgender. Best practices for supporting this community of youth should be specifically included in foster care provider education. Our survey found a small but significantly greater percentage of YFFC identifying as non-binary, genderqueer, or transgender. The stigma and socioemotional challenges faced by this population can add barriers for them when facing the development of positive relationships with others to support their efforts at earning a college degree. The U.S. Children's Bureau compiled information for foster parents focusing on gender identity and supportive parenting techniques [29] These are resources for college administrators, faculty, staff, and mentors to continue to build the support for YFFC youth and provide a safe haven for them in the educational community. Realizing there may be more non-binary and transgender students in the YFFC population than acknowledged in our small sample is important because we know the overlap between these populations renders them doubly at-risk of struggling in college without proper guidance and support [30].

A very small portion, less than one-fourth, of the YFFC in this sample reported using the state tuition waiver that may be available to them. The state where this study took place provides a tuition waiver for youth who have ever been in the foster care system even if they were adopted. This waiver covers the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at all the state's public universities and community

and technical colleges [31]. The waiver must be used within four years of graduating high school or obtaining a GED and once utilized, the waiver is good for 5 years. This finding is particularly relevant as economic hardships have been linked to significantly reduced retention and graduation rates for this population [1]. In theory, more of the students in the survey that reported aging out or being adopted out of foster care may qualify for tuition help. While there may be various reasons why the students may not have used the state tuition waiver, financial support is an important indicator in college success. The authors are doing further research that will investigate YFFC's knowledge about and willingness to pursue the use of the state waiver program. It is important that colleges and universities reach out to the incoming YFFC population to share information about this option and support students in navigating access to additional financial resources such as books and supplies. Without understanding the best ways to pay for college, students may be taking on greater loans or financial stressors than necessary. Helping students make solid financial choices can have a positive long-term impact.

As noted earlier, this university is located in Appalachia, an area of the country with a higher percentage of poverty nationally. The university also has a significant population of non-traditional students (i.e., student parents). YFFC were most likely to fit this profile as single parents and financial providers for their families while taking college courses. Though all respondents reported high stress levels with work/life/school balance, YFFC stress was significantly higher than the non-YFFC respondents. This may be due to additional responsibilities and challenges as parents and caregivers. How we address and respond to our young parents in the college environment should be examined with particular focus on YFFC who have fewer role models for both academic success and parenting. Connecting these students to resources or support could impact their ability to earn a college degree and future family stability. Additionally, foster care providers and case managers should be encouraged to talk with foster youth about the possibility of enrolling in college. Coordinated support as youth transition from foster care should include mental health and education planning resources [11]. This study highlighted the fact that almost one-third of YFFC completed the college application process on their own without assistance. They reported limited connections with faculty, staff, or college peers and

more reliance on social support from friends and family outside of the university. Making links with campus resources can increase the likelihood of academic success.

Limitations

There are several limitations in the current study that should be acknowledged. First, the response rate was 12.7%, thus students who did not participate in the survey may be significantly different than the study sample. We know from extant literature that YFFC have a higher drop-out rate than non-YFFC. This could mean the sample in our study represents only the small number of YFFC who stayed in college. It is important to also note this study is exploratory and does not address deeper layers that might be found with a wider sample and a greater number of relevant variables. Ideally, there would be a greater number of students included with foster care system experiences to increase the odds of accurately representing their perspectives. Social network analysis would be an excellent way to further examine more details surrounding relationships and connectedness among YFFC before and after college.

Involvement with the foster care system can vary widely for each person depending on factors such as adverse childhood events, the length of time in care, and outcome of the involvement. For this study, we were not able to go into detail about foster care background. We share average number of placements and length of time in care as self-report. Future studies would benefit from elaborating on experiences in care and the impact on academic achievement. The trauma of any removal and placement leaves an impact on the child. This study has promising indicators that need further investigation with a more rigorous research design.

GPA is one commonly used measure of academic achievement, but we know that achievement is more nuanced than one cumulative score. Ideally, measurement would include more specific details from official records. Unfortunately, linking respondent information with institutional data was not a feasible option in this study. We suggest future studies examine respondents' official transcripts or examine more longitudinal measures of academic success to better understand potential relationships.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This research study explores the relationship between grit and social support as it relates to academic success among college students, particularly YFFC. Results suggest there may be an interwoven relationship between personal levels of grit and perception of social support that is worth exploring. Students with grit or the ability to persist through challenges and the skills to connect with others who can encourage educational progress may have more success academically than those without these skills. These skills can be taught and as we better grasp their importance in education, adults who support and work with YFFC should be encouraged to help them develop these resiliency skills.

Though this research study is merely an initial exploration of characteristics like grit and connectedness to social supports for YFFC, there are several takeaways we suggest educators and social workers consider.

1. Expanding awareness of, and access to, the state or federal tuition waivers available for foster and adoptive youth. As of 2021, 24 states had statewide tuition waivers and a total of 31 had some type of statewide postsecondary education tuition waiver or scholarship program for YFFC. By increasing awareness of and accessibility to these financial supports, student success can be positively affected, and long-term stability increased by reducing the financial burden. This information should be provided to youth in high school by trusted professionals to allow adequate time for planning. While state child welfare agencies are already required to provide transition services to older youth in foster care and independent living, policies can be strengthened to ensure youth are aware of their options and have assistance through the process of applying for college and financial aid.
2. Identifying and providing stronger campus-based support connections for YFFC. There is a need to support YFFC who are single parents and who are financially supporting family members while trying to attend college. There are models of campus-based programs in more than 30 states providing valuable resources for colleges and universities that are focused on improving in these areas [3]. This might also include teaching interpersonal skills that help to build and maintain positive relationships. Mentoring is one way to build relational skills. At our university, a pilot program linking YFFC with graduate students in Social Work, Psychology and Mental Health Counseling has shown positive outcomes in its pilot phase. The term "interdependent" care has been used to indicate the ongoing social support for youth transitioning out of foster care to aid in developing interpersonal skills and positive relationships [32].
3. In our data, there were a significant number of YFFC who identified as LGBTQIA. This population already faces socioemotional hurdles. It is incumbent upon schools at all levels to incorporate support for students to safely express their unique strengths and personalities while achieving their academic goals. The Inclusive Schools Network offers guided resources for school professionals and families to learn about the variety of gender expressions and best practices for supporting LGBTQIA identified youth [30].

Conclusion

Post-secondary education is essential to gainful employment and the stability to maintain a household and family. We have identified additional hurdles encountered by YFFC as they pursue higher education. By adding more pre-enrollment and campus-based resources to mentor YFFC on building resilience, coping, and interpersonal skills, the odds YFFC can succeed will increase. Future research is encouraged to expand our knowledge of this unique population and the support and resources that provide the best opportunity for academic success.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Instrument

For this study, we define a First-generation college student as being from a family where neither of their parents/legal guardians earned a four-year college degree (bachelor's level).

Students whose parents do not have a degree, but a brother or sister earned a bachelor's degree, are still considered First-generation. Students whose parents hold a two-year degree (associate's level) or other certification are also classified as First-generation students.

1. Are you a First-generation college student?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
2. What were your parent/guardians' expectations about you completing high school?
 - It didn't matter to them if I finished high school or not.
 - They preferred I finish high school, but it was not required.
 - I was definitely required to graduate from high school.
3. How supportive were your parents/guardians about your decision to attend college?
 - Not at all supportive
 - Somewhat unsupportive
 - Somewhat supportive
 - Very supportive
4. How supportive were your high school teachers, counselors or other staff about you attending college?
 - Not at all supportive
 - Somewhat unsupportive
 - Somewhat supportive
 - Very supportive
5. Who was most influential in your decision to look into and apply to colleges? You can choose more than one:
 - No one, I did this on my own (if selected, no others apply)
 - Parent (Mother, Father, Step-mother, Step-father)
 - Close relative (Grandparent, Aunt, Uncle, Brother, Sister, Cousin)
 - Foster parent (or former foster parent) or other legal guardian
 - Teacher, coach, counselor, or staff person
 - Current or previous case worker or social worker
 - Mentor (Big Brother/Big Sister, someone at your church, temple, mosque, someone at your job, friend of a parent Friends
 - Other (describe) _____
6. Which people currently in your life do you feel have a positive influence on your goal achievement? (Select all that apply):
 - Family members (include spouse, partners, foster parents)
 - High school staff (i.e., teacher, counselor, coach, etc)
 - Current or previous case worker or social worker
 - Spiritual advisors (i.e., church, temple, mosque, etc)
 - College peers
 - Friends outside of college
 - Professor, teacher or instructor
 - Academic advisors or counselors
 - Other college staff (i.e., coaches, resident advisors, mentors, organizations)

Social Provisions Scale 10-item

In answering the next set of questions, think about your current relationships with teachers, friends, family, coworkers, and so on. Choose the option that best describes your current relationships with other people.

7. There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it. (1)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
8. There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do. (2)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
9. I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being. (3)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
10. There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life. (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
11. I have relationships where my competence and skills are recognized. (5)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
12. There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems. (6)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
13. I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs. (7)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
14. I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person. (8)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)
15. There are people who admire my talents and abilities. (9)
 - Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)

16. There are people I can count on in an emergency. (10)
- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Agree (3)
 - Strongly Agree (4)

Perseverance Towards Goals (Grit-S 8-item scale)

Here are several statements that may or may not apply to you. When selecting an answer, think of how you compare to most people -- not just the people you know well, but most people in the world. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly!

17. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
- Very much like me (1)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (5)
18. Setbacks don't discourage me.
- Very much like me (5)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (1)
19. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
- Very much like me (1)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (5)
20. I am a hard worker.
- Very much like me (5)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (1)
21. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
- Very much like me (1)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (5)
22. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
- Very much like me (1)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (5)
23. I finish whatever I begin.
- Very much like me (5)
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all (1)

24. I am diligent.

- Very much like me (5)
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all (1)

Confidence in Academic Achievement

25. How confident are you that you will complete college and earn a degree?

- Not at all confident
- Slightly confident
- Moderately confident
- Very confident

26. How confident are you that you will achieve your academic goals?

- Not at all confident
- Slightly confident
- Moderately confident
- Very confident

27. How satisfied are you with your academic career?

- Not at all satisfied
- Slightly satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Very satisfied

Foster care

28. Were you ever in foster care or kinship care with a relative or close family friend?

- Yes
- No (if no, skip to next section)

29. Which of the following best describes how much time you spent in foster and/or kinship care?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-4 years
- 4-5 years
- More than 5 years

30. About how many foster and/or kinship care placements were you in as a child? (Qualtrics selection list 1-20+)

31. Were you adopted?

- Yes
- No, I was reunited with my parents
- No, I aged out of the system

32. During middle and high school (grades 6-12) were you raised by a single parent household?

- Yes
- No

33. Are you the oldest child in the family?

- Yes
- No
- I am an only child

34. Are you using the Tuition Waiver for Foster and Adopted Children to help pay for college?

- Yes (If yes, ask follow-up)
- No
- Do not know about it

a. Who told you about the Tuition Waiver for Foster and Adopted Children?

- Foster parent
- Lawyer/attorney
- Social worker or case worker
- Birth parent
- Teacher
- Guidance counselor
- Found out on my own
- Other: _____

Military Status

35. Are you a current or former member of the U.S. military?

- Yes
- No (if no, skip to next section)

36. With which military branch are you affiliated?

- Air Force
- Army
- Coast Guard
- Marine Corps
- Navy
- Space Force

37. Which best describes your current military status?

- Active Duty
- National Guard
- Reserves
- Retired
- Veteran
- Other: _____

38. Is some or all of your tuition being covered by state or federal military education benefits?

- Yes
- No

39. How important was military and veteran friendly programs in your decision to attend college here?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not at all important

Work-life Balance

40. Do you typically work at a paid job while attending classes?

- I do not work at a paid job (skip a-b)
- On-campus job
- Off-campus job
- Both on-campus and off campus jobs

a. How many hours a week do you work on average at all of your paid jobs? (0-80) _____

b. Do you need to work in order to pay for college and living expenses?

- Yes
- No

41. Are you financially responsible for taking care of other family members (i.e., children, spouse, parents, brothers, sisters, etc.)?
- Yes
 - No
42. Are you a single parent?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't have children
43. How would you rate the level of stress you currently feel in balancing work, college, relationships, and other obligations?
- Very high stress
 - Manageable stress
 - Not really stressed
44. Think about the academic and support services available at our university. Check all the ones you have ever used:
- Academic Advising
 - Career Services
 - Colonel's Cupboard
 - Counseling Center or Psychology Clinic
 - Living/Learning Community
 - Eastern Scholars House
 - Education Abroad
 - First Colonel Program
 - Freshman Academy
 - Honors Program
 - McNair Scholars
 - NOEL Studio
 - NOVA
 - Student Recreation
 - Student Success Center
 - TRIO
 - Other: _____
45. Do you believe you need a college degree in order to get a well-paying job?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not sure, maybe
46. After you complete your bachelor's degree, do you plan to attend graduate school (master's degree, doctorate, law or medical school)?
- Yes
 - No
 - Unsure, maybe

Academic Achievement

47. Select which graduation certificate you earned from high school:
- High school diploma
 - Certificate of completion
 - GED or other equivalency exam
48. What year did you complete high school? _____ (drop down list)
49. How would you rate your experience with transitioning from high school to college?
- Very hard
 - Somewhat hard
 - Somewhat easy
 - Very Easy

50. Which statement best describes your academic path?
- First-time freshman
 - Transferred from another 4-year college
 - Transferred from a community or technical college
 - Reenrolled after taking a break from college
 - Other option: tell us more _____
51. Select your primary campus:
- Corbin Campus
 - eCampus – online student
 - Manchester Campus
 - Richmond Campus
52. What is your major? (drop down list)
53. What year do you expect to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree? (drop down list)
54. How many credit hours did you sign up to take at the beginning of the semester? _____
55. How many credit hours did you drop or withdraw from this semester? _____
- a. (If greater than 0) What is the primary reason you dropped/withdrew from classes this semester? (Text box)
56. How many total credit hours have you completed towards a bachelor's degree (not counting classes you are currently taking but haven't completed yet)? _____
57. What is your current cumulative GPA in your major? (0.0-4.0) _____
58. Do you receive scholarships or financial aid?
- Yes
 - No

Demographics

These last few questions will help us get a picture of who is taking the survey.

59. Select your home state: (drop down list of states – final option is Not from U.S.)
60. Which term best describes your home community? Rural Suburban Urban
61. Which term best describes your current gender identity? We understand there are many different ways you may identify, please pick the one that best describes you.
- Man
 - Woman
 - Non-binary, gender fluid or genderqueer
 - Transgender
 - I am not sure or questioning
 - Decline to answer
62. Select your current age group: 18-24; 25-30; 31-35; 36-40; 41-45; 45-50; 51 or older
63. Select your race/ethnicity. You can choose more than one:
- African
 - Alaskan Native
 - Native American/American Indian
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic/Latinx
 - Native Hawaiian
 - Other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Other (describe): _____

Thank you for taking time to share your responses!! They have been recorded and will help improve our understanding of these issues.