

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: **Critical Passages to Success: An Exploratory Comparison of Factors that Support or Inhibit College Persistent Behaviors in Women Emancipated from Foster Care**

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This dissertation presents an examination of the dynamics of college persistent behaviors in women emancipated from foster care and, through an analysis of critical incidents, suggests the experiences of these women provide new perspectives on conventional models in this area.

This case study, "Critical Passages to Success," contends that a full account of the complex ways in which college persistence may be manifested must include careful attention to the perceptions and experiences of those concerned. Consequently, this study moves from an examination of the limitations of conventional college persistence models as they pertain to this population to a consideration of features of experience and identity that characterize, and support, college persistent behaviors in this particular population. My analysis concludes that this population's unusual location at the intersection of traditional and non-traditional student attributes offers insight into under-examined features of college persistent behaviors. Chief among these under-examined features is the powerful role the negotiation of identity constructs by these young women plays in supporting college persistent behaviors within the context of transitioning from foster care into emancipated adulthood. In addition, my investigation of the dynamics of

identity in interaction with two other key elements, specifically – academic influences and environmental influences, have the most explanatory power in understanding the sustainability of college persistence in young women emancipated from foster care. Across all of the accounts of educational persistence, the women consistently demonstrated that their motivation for seeking continued educational advancement goes beyond the material security of establishing a career. Instead, these young women were clear that the attainment of educational success would, in their personal estimation, change their life outcomes --- sometimes for the goal of mere survival. Finally, in light of the complex dynamic that develops between identity negotiation, environmental and academic influences, and the particular focus of their motivation to achieve educational success, I argue that a careful consideration of their unconventional backgrounds in foster care placements, strained relationships with adults, and obligations outside of college point to the important role trust and openness in relationships with key individuals play in supporting college persistive behaviors in this population.