

## Finding the Yellow Brick Road: Bridging the Gap Between African American Foster Care Youth and Higher Education

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### Abstract

This critical action research thesis addresses the need for a university-based bridge program for African American foster care youth seeking to obtain a college degree. The reviewed literature explores a plethora of barriers African American foster care youth face in pursuing higher education, and how social and systemic structures have contributed to those barriers. In examining this literature, and literature regarding on-campus foster care youth support programs, I have proposed and justified an intervention plan. This intervention plan coined the Yellow Brick Road Program will help eradicate the barriers that hinder accessibility for African American foster care students. By creating an on-campus central point, these students will have access to support services that will tend to their emotional, financial, educational, and personal needs. The outcome of this program will lead to African American foster care youth successfully transitioning into college and graduating with a college degree.

### Keywords:

Foster Care, Student,  
African American,  
Foster care alumni,  
foster youth,  
students of color,  
higher education,  
College Access,  
Bridge Program

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## **Background to the Study**

Accessibility is a human right that we all share. Historically, racism, sexism, and classism have been used as a vehicle to violate this right. Since its inception, higher education institutions have upheld these reprehensible values. During the 1600s, when institutions were first founded, they were private, limited to young white Christian males, and taught "history" that centered on the experience of white European colonizers (Patton, 2016). It wasn't until the 1800s, during the civil war outbreak, that the purposes, practices, philosophies, and demographics of higher education institutions began changing. During this time, people of color and women were permitted to obtain a college degree, build their own institutions, and take on professions that led them to become lawyers, accountants, physicians, scientists, and educators (MacKinnon, 2004). This societal shift forever changed the nature of higher education. Since the 1800's there have been many other societal shifts that have led to new laws emerging and old laws changing, which created more accessibility to higher education institutions. Laws such as Title X, the Civil Rights Act, Affirmative Action, National Defense Act, and the GI Bill have helped to combat inequitable, and harmful practices that barred many populations of students from obtaining a degree. Today, those same populations who several hundred years ago would not have had the opportunity to experience a college education, now have that opportunity and so much more. I am proud to say I belong to a few of the populations that are benefiting from these institutional changes. However, the ghosts of our horrid foundation still linger within our society and educational system and there is still a lack of accessibility for other populations of students who desperately need access and support. According to researcher Mauriell Amechi (2016), "youth exiting the U.S. foster care systems are among the least likely to enroll in college and are overwhelmingly one of the most disadvantaged groups in higher education".

These students struggle financially while enrolled in college, have difficulty finding safe and stable housing, experience instability in relationships, and may struggle with past trauma (Amechi, 2018). In addition, these students have been shown to be less prepared academically and experience less support and guidance than their peers (Amechi, 2018). These factors contribute to poor educational outcomes among foster care youth of color, which increases their likelihood of experiencing homelessness and incarceration (Day et al., 2011). When foster care youth can achieve higher levels of education, they are much more likely to obtain greater self-sufficiency, financial stability, and healthier lifestyles, among other well-documented benefits (e.g., higher lifetime earnings, lower unemployment rates, a wider range of employment opportunities) (Amechi, 2016). For these reasons, it is important to focus on properly supporting this population of students. As a student affair professional, it is my job and the job of higher education institutions to help students become successful. The likelihood of college success increases for students when they have support and access. Allowing vulnerable student populations to go unnoticed and become left behind goes against what I believe is the purpose of higher education. In chapter two, I will share with you my philosophy of education and what I believe institutions should be doing for students.

### **The Institution**

The Commonwealth Student Association was successful in its efforts and won a court injunction against the increase (Hook, 1982). This major event later led to more political activity on college campuses and encouraged politicians to focus more on issues directly related to education (Hook, 1982). Politicians also began to take more consideration of who they put into political offices (Hook, 1982). This is only one of the hundreds of examples of how institutions, in fact, can be engines of social transformation. Educational philosophers such as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have argued that modern universities are dedicated to professionalization, order, scientific efficiency, counterinsurgency, and war (Kelley, 2016). They go a step further by stating that "university culture [is] bent on creating socially isolated individuals whose academic skepticism and claims of objectivity leave the world-as-it-is intact" (Kelley, 2016). Once again, I cannot support the critiques of Harney and Moten, especially as a student affairs professional. According to Thelin (2003) "American higher education was distinctive from the beginning in that it was based on the belief that the student's character, as well as scholarship, must be developed" (p. 1). For this very reason, the Student Affairs profession exists.

The emergence of extracurricular activities such as student organizations and clubs, volunteer, and internship opportunities all help to shape and cultivate students' character. Participation in these activities helps students think more critically and inform them about the world around them. These experiences force students to have experiences that challenge the status quo of our larger society. Students leave the university anew and go out into the world with the courage to change the social conditions around them and the knowledge to know exactly how to do it. I have experienced this as a student and continue to see this happen with students as a professional. So, once again, I do not subscribe to Harney and Moten's dated ideas about higher education and its purpose. Like philosopher, Michael Oakeshott (2004), I believe the university has gotten mixed with notions such as advanced training, exploitation, world power, and social and individual egoism. Due to society, which is the home of these notions, those who dwell within it bring these beliefs into the university when seeking what they believe is higher learning. Higher education professionals of today must rebuke this kind of thinking. Oakeshott (2004) called for universities to "beware of the patronage of this world." Allowing the university to be a space of competitiveness, bias, prejudice, racism, patriarchy, racial capitalism, and simple job training defeats its purpose and proper function.

A real university is a place of hospitality. According to Derrida (2000), hospitality involves making a space or giving space to those who are unknown, anonymous, or other and letting them arrive and take the space that is offered without the expectation of reciprocity. The university must be a hospitable place that welcomes the voices, stories, experiences, and knowledge of those who are historically unknown, unmentioned, and considered "other" (Derrida, 2000). These voices allow one to experience the world as one knows it through others' lens, thus creating a new lens for oneself and transforming one's

mind (Derrida, 2000). This is what I believe to be one of the main goals of the university–transformation. Those who enter the university must exit it anew. Philosopher Dewey shares my sentiments and agrees that a truly educative experience should include transformation via growth and interaction within one's environment (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey (1938), interactive experiences between people and their environment can be labeled “educative,” because it creates a space for continued growth through continual interaction. “As people grow through interaction with their environment, they also alter their environment in substantive ways” (Wozniak, 2021). The environment not only becomes altered but so do those who dwell within it (Wozniak, 2021). Their experiences change something within them, enabling them to change others (Wozniak, 2021). Thus, going back to my aforementioned statement “those who enter the university exit it anew,” and as they have changed themselves, set out to make changes within our world and the larger society.

A real university is also a place of collaboration. Per Oakeshott (2004), a university does not draw inspiration from just one single man, but from a body of scholars who share with one another personally and scholastically. Creating spaces for open sharing and collaboration forms a sense of freedom and acceptance, which allows one to grow academically and socially. The university is where academic and personal growth happens simultaneously, making it a unique and influential place. A university is not a real university if it cannot be hospitable, transformative, and collaborative. These key factors are needed to fulfill the university's ultimate purpose, which is to produce citizens that are not just capable workers but justice-oriented individuals who can engage constructively and ethically and who will forge a healthy democracy.

### **Action Research Becomes Critical**

Critical Action Research is a form of Action Research that seeks to expose and change existing power structures and inequalities experienced by a community being studied (Kemmis, 2008). This branch of Action Research serves to usher a new relationship between the researcher and the participants and offers new means of observation on the relationship between theory and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Unlike the scientific method, CAR seeks to educate participants in ways that will help them understand the nature and consequences of their actions more fully and make conclusions for the next steps (Kemmis, 2008). CAR seeks to have participants collaborate in sharing perspectives, have the researcher take on a participant role, analyze issues and brainstorm solutions, and transforms and improves matters for all stakeholders (Kemmis, 2008). CAR also focuses on changing history and establishing justice by “exploring existing conditions to find out how particular perspectives, social structures or practices may be irrational, unjust, alienating or inhumane” (Kemmis, 2008, p. 125). Further, it helps to explore how particular perspectives, social structures, and practices are interlinked and how they conspire to produce unwanted effects (Kemmis, 2008). According to Kemmis (2008), the overall aim is to find ways to change these things, so unfavorable outcomes are avoided.

Successfully carrying out the CAR process involves looking at issues dialectically (Kemmis, 2008). This means reviewing an issue objectively, as others see it (observers, outsiders, others) and reviewing an issue subjectively, as the person involved sees it (internal, insider, participant, self) (Kemmis, 2008). This helps to provide an understanding of issues from multiple points of view and can aid in creating more cohesive solutions. CAR participants engage in communicative actions that allow them to build solidarity and communicative power in spaces that go beyond a mere group project (Kemmis, 2008). According to Kemmis (2008), shared perspectives and discussions during CAR usually connect to a broader public sphere, giving the participants views and ideas a sense of legitimacy. The outcome of CAR leads to a transformation of social and institutional structures and practice. CAR also compels participants to change the way they interact in various settings, two of which include educational and social settings (Kemmis, 2008).

### **The Importance of CAR**

CAR have contributed to many advancements in the higher education field. Through undergoing these research processes, students, professors, and other higher education stakeholders observed, reflected, and acted on social and institutional issues they faced and created immediate solutions. CAR, in particular, has helped to improve processes of learning and teaching. It has aided in developing and enhancing "policies, plans, and procedures for how programs and services are delivered to those served by institutions" (Stringer, 2014, p. 60). As its popularity and effectiveness has grown, CAR has become a fundamental component of teaching, developing curriculum, assessment, classroom management, and student research. (Stringer, 2014). It has also helped higher education professionals collaborate effectively with families and communities (Stringer, 2014).

CAR has become the foundation for wise and prudent social action on themes, problems, and issues of contemporary concern (Kemmis, 2008). It has offered its practitioners new ways of investigating existing conditions and possible futures (Kemmis, 2008). With CAR, higher education professionals are equipped to examine how social structures, perspectives, and practices are related to institutions. This examination could explain how institutional structures mirror societal attitudes and ideals, which aren't always rational, just, or humane. CAR will not only allow its participants to identify and examine unfavorable structures, perspectives and practices but will help to produce solutions that will be "for the good of individuals persons and mankind" (Kemmis, 2008). For these reasons, I will be using a Critical Action Research lens to examine the issue of African American foster care youth not being properly supported by higher education institutions. The crux of this issue stems from social structures and systemic structures that are designed to further disenfranchise this specific population of students. Examining this issue through a CAR lens will aid me in generating robust solutions and help decipher how and what specific issues play a part in the problem. I will be referring to research, testimonies, and data collected by activists, higher education professionals, and students to help identify issues and solutions. I will then discuss how a solution can be reached and implemented.

### **Higher Education Institution Foundations**

To fully understand the effects that racism, classism, and capitalism have on African American foster youth entering the higher education system, we must first examine how our education system came to be and how it has transformed into what we see today. As previously stated in Chapter 1, During the 1600s, when institutions were first founded, they were private, limited to young white Christian males of high social status, and taught "history" that centered on the experience of white European colonizers (Patton, 2016). For centuries, institutional curriculum left little to no mention of the experiences of colonized people despite the fact that these people were the reason institutions existed. The Atlantic Slave Trade played a huge part in the foundation of higher education institutions. African slaves were used economically to fund institutions and were used physically to construct and upkeep these very same institutions (Wilder, 2014). The buying, selling, trading, and bequeathing of slaves, plantations, and goods administered by slave labor generated the means to sustain higher education institutions, award student scholarships, pay students tuition, build successful careers, and pass on wealth from generation to generation (Wilder, 2014). Those who founded, attended, invested in, and willingly supported higher institutions during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries benefited financially and socially (Wilder, 2014). Their descendants continue to economically and socially benefit today. For hundreds of years, African slaves did not have the privilege of attending the institutions they built. They did not have access to the education that would have helped them to become economically and socially equal with their colonizers. Because of this, many of their descendants continue to economically and socially suffer today.

### **Transforming Higher Education Institutions**

With the start of the mid-1800s, higher education institutions began looking very different. Due to the Civil War outbreak in 1862, societal needs and desires began transforming higher institutions' purposes, practices, philosophies, and demographics (MacKinnon, 2004). The types of degree programs offered had increased, extracurricular activities began to emerge, and women had become permitted to attend higher education institutions, take on faculty jobs, and even develop their own women's colleges (MacKinnon, 2004). The emergence of trade schools, along with historically Black colleges and universities began taking America by storm (MacKinnon, 2004), mainly due to the widespread segregation of post-secondary institutions. Segregation, brought on by racism, played a major role in the turbulent relationship between African Americans and higher education. African American students like James Meredith and Autherine Lucy have experienced first-hand how higher education institutions have excluded and alienated people of color. In 1962, James Meredith attempted to enroll at the University of Mississippi, an all-white institution (Onion et al., 2010). The University of Mississippi had previously denied Meredith admission until he filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against them and won (Onion et al., 2010). Once he arrived on campus, he was attacked by a mob of over 2,000 students and others—ending with two dead, hundreds wounded, and many others arrested (Onion et al., 2010). This event was so chaotic that the Kennedy administration had to call out some 31,000 National Guardsmen and other federal forces to enforce order (Onion et al., 2010).

African American graduate student Autherine Lucy, suffered a similar fate. According to the United States Courts (2021), in 1952, Lucy applied to attend the University of Alabama and was admitted. After finding out that she was African American, the institution revoked her acceptance (United States Courts, 2021). Lucy called on the assistance of a prominent lawyer by the name of Thurgood Marshall to help her reverse the institution's decision. The U.S Supreme court decided in Lucy's favor and in 1956 she stepped foot onto the campus (United States Courts, 2021). After 3 days of being on campus, Lucy was attacked by a mob who threw eggs at her and used hateful language (United States Courts, 2021). After the attack, Lucy hid in a nearby classroom for safety. The university later suspended her, claiming that the action was taken for her own protection. After the event, Lucy and Marshall attempted to file a complaint against the university, which resulted in Lucy being expelled on the grounds that her legal action had slandered the university (United States Courts, 2021).

For hundreds of years, African Americans had to endure traumatizing and horrific experiences in pursuit of a higher education. Many of these experiences were highly publicized and gained the gaze of citizens across the United States and the world. The scrutiny from those in favor and against these events brought forth the current social and educational changes we see today. With societal attitudes altering around race, class, gender, and education, the laws affiliated with them too were altered. Below I have listed a few laws that played a huge role in shaping our current higher education system. These laws have been put in place over time to help absolve our education system of its shameless and discriminatory foundation. The purpose of these laws was to restore human decency and create social and economic equity, equality, inclusion, and balance within our larger society. I would argue that for the most part, these laws have accomplished that. The same populations of people who several hundred years ago would not have had the right or access to higher education, now have that opportunity. However, the ghosts of our horrid past still linger and accessibility in our higher education system is STILL an issue. Currently, this issue is severely impacting some of the most vulnerable populations of students in our country.

**Table 1.**

Year	Law	Description
1890	The Second Morrill Act	This act withheld funds from states that refused students' admission to the land grant colleges based on race. However, states could provide separate institutions for minorities to avoid fund withholdings.
1954	Brown v. Board of Education	This ruling concluded that "separate but equal" educational facilities were unconstitutional.
1961	Affirmative Action	This was an executive order issued by President John F. Kennedy, which created the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. This was the first time Affirmative Action was referred to.
1961	Dixon v. Alabama	This court ruling established that students who attended public higher education institutions should be given due process in dismissal from institutions.
1964	Civil Rights Act	This law protected people from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin.
1972	Title IX	This law prohibits discrimination based on gender, marital, and parental status in the following areas: admissions, financial aid, health, and insurance benefits, career guidance, and counseling services, housing, courses, and other educational activities and scholastic, intramural, club or intercollegiate athletics.

Source: (Boggs et al., 2020; Forest & Kinser, 2002)

**Relevant Factors**

**Racism and Inequality in the U.S.**

As stated in the state of my concern section below, African Americans are a vulnerable group within the child welfare system and are more likely than their peers to be placed in foster care due to poverty. This issue of poverty can be directly connected to the topics of racism, classism, and capitalism. As you've read, descendants of African slaves do not have an equal economic or social status, in comparison to other groups of people in the United States. The effects of our disreputable past have continued to paralyze the descendants of African slaves, also known as African Americans. According to the 2020 Census report, those who identified as Black or African American had the highest poverty rate, hovering at 19.5%, which did not change from the poverty rate recorded in 2019 (Shrider et al., 2022). Latinx/Hispanics had a poverty rate of 17%, Asians had a poverty rate of 8.1%, and Caucasians had a poverty rate of 8.2% (Shrider et al., 2022). The overall poverty rate in the United States is currently 11.4%, yet the poverty rate for African Americans alone almost doubles that (Shrider et al., 2022). These statistics put into perspective just how dire the racial disparity is in this country.

Other factors such as redlining help to perpetuate this disparity and keep communities of color in or below the poverty line. Redlining is known as an illegal discriminatory practice

that landlords and mortgage lenders would partake in to restrict housing based on race in certain areas. Historically landlords and mortgage lenders would mark areas on a map with red ink to determine what areas were and weren't suitable for minority races (Pearcy, 2020). Today the marking of maps no longer take place, however, redlining still happens. Many refer to the new form of redlining as gentrification, but that is another topic for another paper. The origins of redlining can be traced back to slavery and the Civil War. After the Civil War, many African Americans in the south moved north to escape systemic oppression and racial terrorism (Pearcy, 2020). However, what they found was that the North was less overtly threatening but was still a repressive place that followed a system that sought to regulate the presence of African Americans in public spaces (Pearcy, 2020). The southern states were known for enforcing specific and specialized laws against racial integration, the northern states achieved this same outcome but via housing laws and restrictive covenants (Pearcy, 2020). This sparked segregation and ghettoization which is a deliberate result of the housing policies of the federal, state, and local governments (Pearcy, 2020). This deliberate act "steered people of particular racial/ ethnic backgrounds toward less desirable neighborhoods and away from ones they might have chosen which were, inevitably, whiter" (Pearcy, 2020, p. 44). To ensure that specific races stayed in their "designated areas", rent, mortgage, and local property taxes were raised—barring individuals who historically and generationally do not come from favorable economic backgrounds (i.e., African Americans and other people of color) from desirable housing. In being barred from favorable housing, African Americans were also barred from having their children attend more favorable schools. Since a significant portion of school revenue is derived from local property taxes, and African Americans do not have the highest property taxes in their neighborhoods, they were extremely undervalued and received scant educational funding (Pearcy, 2020).

This lack of proper funding has led to a lack of proper educational resources for African American students, which in the long run keeps them and their families in poverty. Research has shown that as the average family income in a school goes up, so does student achievement. This can help to explain why African Americans and other students of color have difficulty in educational success (Pearcy, 2020). These historical impacts are exacerbated for Black foster care youth as compared to youth in the general population, youth in foster care are less likely to perform at grade level, are twice as likely to repeat a grade, experience out-of-school suspension, and expulsion far more than their peers, and tend to be concentrated in the lowest-performing schools (Day et al., 2011). Thus, as noted by Davis (2006), when entering higher education, foster care youth "generally need remedial assistance" (p. 30). This history impacts Black foster care youth financially as well. Because of the past practices of redlining, Black families have significantly lower wealth than white families (Bhutta et al, 2020). Subsequently, Black families have less ability to contribute to paying costs related to college for their children. As noted by Hanson (2022), "Black college graduates owe an average of \$25,000 more in student loan debt than White college graduates," and "four years after graduation, 48% of Black students owe an average of 12.5% more than they borrowed" (emphasis original, p. 1). Families in the foster care system tend to experience high levels of financial inequality

(Eckenrode et al, 2014), making higher education financial struggles even more likely for foster care youth. Thus, because of the history of racism and inequality in the United States, Black foster care students in higher education are often doubly disadvantaged as they transition to college.

### **Law & Policy Issues**

During the early 1980s, researchers, child welfare advocates, and lawmakers began to become concerned about the outcomes of youth who had aged out of the foster care system (Okpych, 2012). They found that many of these youth had experienced incarceration, mental health issues, and homelessness (Okpych, 2012). These outcomes were not only shocking but alarming, and over the past 25 years, several pieces of federal legislation have appropriated funding to promote foster care youths' transition into adulthood via higher education (Okpych, 2012). Some of those federal legislative pieces included the Independent Living Initiative of 1986, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the Education and Training Voucher of 2001, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (Okpych, 2012). Although legislation has been put in place to help support the foster care youth transition, the extent of assistance and services available to youth aging out of care is contingent upon several factors.

According to Okpych (2012), the financial and non-financial support that is available varies widely based on the state in which foster youth reside and the postsecondary institution they attend. Youth aging out of foster care can apply for federal support through income-based grants and programs (e.g., Pell Grants and GEAR-UP), student loans, and national scholarships, however, there are several other services and supports that are contingent on location (Okpych, 2012). Each state receives funding for foster care youth seeking a college degree, however, they have the authority to dictate the amount of funding they allocate to these students and what services they'd like to provide them (Okpych, 2012). Some states offer foster care youth tuition waivers, scholarships, or grants while others do not (Okpych, 2012). This is disheartening because African American foster care youth in all states deserve an equal opportunity to receive benefits and supports that could make obtaining a college degree possible. Allowing states to control the amount of educational funding and support provided to foster care youth accommodates further inequality and sets the goal line at different levels for these youth.

In the state of Pennsylvania, my home state, colleges and universities, including public, private, community colleges, and state-related schools, award fostering independence tuition waivers to foster care youth who are pursuing a college degree (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). The waivers cover tuition costs as well as college application fees, and they can be used for up to five years or until a student reaches age 26 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). The Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program was created by Act 16 of 2019 and it seeks to remove barriers to accessing post-secondary education for youth who are or have been in foster care (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). While Pennsylvania is not alone in taking additional

steps to increase educational accessibility, the journey to obtaining a college degree could be more difficult in states where there is less extensive support (Okpych, 2012). Foster care “youth who age out of care and attend college in states where support is not as extensive become increasingly responsible for sustaining their own basic livelihood while at the same time acclimating to college and fulfilling academic responsibilities. Financial demands may necessitate that they work to pay for unmet expenses but doing so could compromise their ability to remain enrolled and do well in school” (Okpych, 2012, p. 1392).

### **African American Youth vs The Foster Care System**

The child welfare system is intended to protect children and maintain their safety. According to Lane (2017): African Americans are a vulnerable group within the child welfare system. They are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, accounting for 14% of the U.S. child population, but representing 24% of the child welfare system. African Americans are more likely than their peers to be placed in foster care due to poverty and remain in foster care longer than children of other races. They are also least likely to be adopted. African American foster care youth experience trauma, neglect, abuse, instability, and a lack of support in educational advancement while navigating the foster care system (Day et al., 2011; Morton, 2018). The trauma that they experience may include sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Hallett et al., 2018). Trauma is further experienced when these children are taken away from their birth families, when they are separated from siblings, when they lose friends or family members, or when they are moved from one foster care placement to another (Day et al., 2011; Morton, 2018). According to Day et al. (2011): Entry into foster care, as well as any subsequent placement changes, is often accompanied by changes in the school. These school changes can have a negative effect on academic progress, especially if poor coordination occurs between child welfare and school personnel. Difficulties while transferring school records also add to the negative effects and lead to a significant delay when foster care youth enroll in a new school. Placement instability helps to explain the negative relationship between educational achievement and foster care youth.

### **African American Foster Care Youth vs. The Education System**

The trauma and abuse that these youth face may also help explain their negative educational outcomes. Researcher Day et al. (2011) reports that the trauma experienced by children who have been neglected or abused can lead to a variety of developmental problems, such as learning disabilities or behavioral and emotional disorders. Researchers Hernandez & Naccarato (2010) echo this claim and add that youth trauma has led to “academic challenges related to reading, writing, and math”. Additionally, compared to youth in the general population, youth in foster care are less likely to perform at grade level, are twice as likely to repeat a grade, experience out-of-school suspension and expulsion far more than their peers, and tend to be concentrated in the lowest-performing schools (Day et al., 2011). A major consequence of foster care youth experiencing these difficulties is that they are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers (Day et al., 2011).

Research has shown that as few as one-third or as many as two-thirds of youth in foster care graduate from high school (Day et al., 2011). These numbers are extremely low in comparison to the general population of students. The numbers for foster care youth transitioning into college are equally low. Studies suggest that fewer than 10% of foster youth attend college, others suggest that the figure may be as high as one-third (Day et al., 2011). For the few that do matriculate into college, the national completion rate hovers around 15% (Amechi, 2016). Those numbers for African American foster youth may be lower, since in general, African American (37%) youths have a lower rate of college attendance than their White (41%), Asian (62%), or Multiracial (47%) counterparts (Lane, 2016 & De Brey, 2021). In addition to the academic and mental hardships, African American foster youth face a lack of financial and parental support. Many of these youth do not have the monetary capital or financial knowledge needed to make paying for college a reality (Morton, 2018). Many times, they cannot depend on their foster parents to help with this process. According to researcher Brenda Morton (2018), oftentimes foster care youth are placed with adults who underestimate their potential and lack post-secondary experience. As a result, they are not encouraged to explore and pursue a degree (Morton, 2018). "This leaves foster care youth without guidance on how to successfully prepare and navigate the challenges and complexities of a college or university" (Morton, 2018).

#### **African American Foster Care Youth & Fortitude**

Despite their many challenges and low enrollment rates, African American foster youth, have a strong desire to obtain a college degree. An estimated 70% of foster care youth aspire to obtain postsecondary educational credentials (Geiger et al., 2018). According to Lane (2017): African American foster youth tend to use their unfavorable social factors and harmful experiences in foster care as inspiration to achieve a college degree. Many of them feel that being college-educated would break the cycle of social and economic adversities within their family systems. They also hope to break the cycle and stigma around poverty and foster care youth, in particular, those related to the notion that foster care youth are incapable of being successful in social and educational endeavors. African American foster care youth not only have the desire to procure a better life for themselves via a college degree, but they also have the commitment required to be successful college students and graduates. According to Amechi (2016, p. 29), they "are more likely to progress toward self-authorship as adolescents as a result of the adverse environmental conditions within the foster care system. The provocative and adverse experiences related to foster care proved to be catalysts for self-authorship development." Self-Authorship is defined by Baxter Magolda (2004) as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations." (p. 269). In Lamens terms, this means that African American foster care youth can build their core selves and have a stronger sense of who they are at a younger age. This is a skill that many do not gain until they become young adults. Having this ability "enhances their success in terms of their academic self-efficacy, and their ability to cope effectively with and respond to adversity in college. In other words, students who enter college with a self-authored way of knowing may display greater confidence in overcoming academic challenges and coping with difficult sociocultural experiences" (Amechi, 2016).

It is clear that African American foster care youth have the desire and the willpower it takes to have college success, but they lack the proper support in those endeavors. When youth become 18 years old and age out of foster care, the welfare system is no longer responsible for them (Lane, 2017). This means that they lose the prior support they received while they were in foster care. This can include educational, social, financial, physical, and mental health support and services. Once foster care youth age out of the welfare system, they are expected to conduct themselves as self-sufficient adults, who are responsible for their own well-being (Lane, 2017). This is extremely troubling because many of the African American foster care youth suffer from mental, social, financial, and academic difficulties that do not go away once they turn eighteen. Many foster care programs realize this issue and have made strides to increase resources for youth who are aging out of the system, including transitional housing, mental health, and independent living skills program (Hallet, 2018). However, they still fall short of meeting the needs of these youth.

### **Supporting African American Foster Care Youth**

According to Lane (2017), the lack of resources available to African American foster care youth can impede their ability to thrive in college, specifically, those from lower socioeconomic circumstances. "Exposure to opportunities to increase their social and cultural resources is crucial to their academic success. Those experiences may include college-bound programs, intensive training programs, mentor programs, and involvement with cultural and professional groups" (Lane, 2017, p. 149). African American youth are more likely to attend college when they have the influence of social supports such as school counselors, administrators, teachers, and even parents and family members (Lane, 2016). Research also suggests that having comprehensive supports serve as buffers for foster youth and helps them navigate college and career opportunities (Amechi, 2016).

A study conducted by Pier et al. (2019) showed that foster care youth who have received services from college support programs feel that these programs are beneficial to their success and should address issues such as housing, academics, relationships, and finances in a holistic way. Another study conducted by Gillim (2018) concluded that 86% of foster care youth who received college support services believe that their program brought forth a sense of family and stability. More than 75% of foster care youth indicated that this feeling of family was important to them (Gillim, 2018). As stated, prior, the reasons for African American foster care youth having low retention and graduation rates can be attributed to them having a lack of academic preparation, mental health issues, lack of social support, insufficient funds, and need for emergency assistance (e.g., with food, transportation) (Gillim, 2018). These factors may be overcome with appropriate support and services, which include personal, familial, collegiate, state, and/or federal participation and reinforcement. (Gillim, 2018). After examining the issues African American foster youth face and the factors that cause these issues, I believe an intervention needs to take place. In chapter 4, I will discuss my intervention plan for this population of students and how it can be carried out.

## **Leadership in Higher Education and Student Affairs**

For years, higher education professionals have created seminars, workshops, and conferences geared towards teaching other professionals how to be an effective leader in the field. However, many professionals within the field have varying beliefs surrounding the topic. According to Northouse (2019), an effective leader has the ability to influence overall group effectiveness. Effective leaders can keep group members on track with set goals and uphold and manage processes in place. Effective leaders are decisive, resolution-oriented, and communicative. I believe that those who aspire to make real change in the higher education field will not just be effective leaders but transformative ones. Like effective leaders, transformative leaders influence their group members and promote group performance. However, transformative leaders like to create a connection that raises motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (Northouse, 2019). This type of leader is attentive to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their fullest potential (Northouse, 2019). Transformational leadership does not uphold the status quo and seeks to make significant and lasting changes. Due to the United States higher education system's foundation, rooted in slavery, racism, sexism, and capitalism, we NEED leaders who do not uphold the status quo but bring about change and transformation. The way to help those in need, especially populations who have been negatively affected by the status quo, is to transform the system that we currently have in place. With the right leaders in place, this most certainly can and will happen.

## **Leadership and The Yellow Brick Road Program**

### **Yellow Brick Road Program Staff**

It is essential for the Yellow Brick Road Program staff members to establish the proper leadership style to create positive change within African American foster care youths' lives. I intend to draw from the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Rubric for guidance on how to coach staff members on exhibiting proper leadership skills. I have identified three competencies that I believe are key to accomplishing this.

This includes:

1. Self-Awareness and Continual Reflection,
2. Teamwork and Interpersonal Skills, and
3. Change Management and Innovation. Self-Awareness and Continual Reflection calls for one to “identify the experiences and theoretical perspective that inform one's leadership” (Perillo et al., 2015).

Leaders who focus on this competency will understand how their experiences and perspective influence their actions regarding leadership. They will have an in-depth understanding of why they do or do not choose to make certain decisions and how those decisions affect an overall outcome. Teamwork and Interpersonal Skills call for one to know how to “identify one's strengths and challenges as a leader and seek opportunities to develop skills” (Perillo et al., 2015). Leaders who look for opportunities for growth and improvement become very skilled and multifaceted leaders. These leaders develop many

tools and learn how and when to use them to yield favorable results. Change Management and Innovation calls for one to “know leadership theories and practices that can improve operations and campus cultures” (Perillo et al., 2015). Leaders who are competent in this arena can take in the political, social, and cultural climate of one's campus and strategically and creatively take action even in the face of criticism (Perillo et al., 2015). These competencies play a considerable role in producing the proper leaders for the Yellow Brick Road Program. Program staff who can follow and master these competencies will have the ability to inspire positive transformation in the lives of African American foster care youth. This positive change will eventually lead to my goal of achieving systematic metamorphosis. This systemic change will take time, but I believe that my program will be a step in the right direction to help turn the higher education system into a system that genuinely services all who seek to matriculate within it.

### **Yellow Brick Road Program Scholars**

Through personal experience as a student, and as a professional supporting student, I have learned that many students experience success when they decide to become a leader. They learn how to take charge of their lives and advocate for themselves, make sound decisions, and foster strong networks. Therefore, I intend to have the Yellow Brick Road Program Scholars follow the Social Change Model of Leadership Development. The Social Change Model of Leadership Development seeks to enhance students' self-knowledge and leadership competence and promote positive social change at institutions or in communities (Astin & Astin, 1996). In this model, students are provided with opportunities that foster personal qualities, develop leadership abilities, and engage in positive social change. The Social Change Model of Leadership is based is governed by the “Seven C's” (Astin & Astin, 1996).

The Seven C's include

1. **Consciousness of Self:** Being aware of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate one to take action,
2. **Congruence:** Understanding and being consistent with one's own values, beliefs, strengths, and limitations,
3. **Commitment:** Passion, intensity, and duration, directed both towards group activity and intended outcome,
4. **Collaboration:** Group members explore differences in individual values, ideas, affiliations, visions, and identities,
5. **Common Purpose:** All members of the group share in the vision and participate actively in articulating the purpose and goals of the activity,
6. **Controversy with Civility:** differences between group members can be accepted and resolved through open and honest dialogue,
7. **Citizenship:** Civic responsibility which works towards social change (Astin & Astin, 1996). These “SevenC's” would be used to help guide programming for the Scholars that help to build their character and develop them as leaders on campus, within their community, and within their personal lives.

### **The Yellow Brick Road Program Sustainability**

For my program to be successful, I must have the proper funding to manage the program's essentials. Some essentials include personnel, office supplies and equipment, marketing, coordination, and programming/events. Funding for these essentials can be expensive, especially considering the level of support scholars will need during the program. I provided an itemized breakdown of some of the costs which can be found in Appendix D. To support the hefty cost of this program, I have considered a few funding sources. The first would be to look to the institution to provide financial support and assistance. This can be done through the campus foundation soliciting donations from alumni, institutional partners, and community members who are invested in the success of current and prospective students. Next, would be to look to private organizations such as the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust to provide grant money and support for the program. I could then seek out federally funded programs such as The Chafee Education and Training Grant (ETG) Program and the Federal TRIO Program to provide further funding and support.

### **Assessment, Evaluation, and the Yellow Brick Road Program**

In higher education, especially in the student affairs sector, the use of assessment and evaluation is crucial in determining the proper program development and budget needed to help programs be successful. Using assessments and evaluations will help to evaluate the impact that the Yellow Brick Road Program has on African American foster care youth, in addition to giving them a voice. The information collected from the assessments and evaluations will influence future decisions regarding programming, program content, special events, meetings, partnerships, support services, and even funding sources. The use of assessments and evaluations will also help provide a clearer picture of the staff members' experience and what they may need to better assist the Yellow Brick Road Program Scholars. In doing this, I will better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the program from a student and staff perspective. I will be able to pinpoint what things the Yellow Brick Road Program can and cannot change and where there are areas for possibilities. The data will also help to expose specific logistical, social, and systematic issues that prevent student success and how the Yellow Brick Road Program may be limited by these issues. Further, this data could aid in providing explanations and solutions regarding African American and foster care youth admission, retention, graduation, and success rates. Using assessments and evaluations for this purpose directly correlates with the purpose of Critical Action Research. Compiling feedback from students and program staff helps to ensure that my program is properly catering to African American foster care youth and serves as proof that my program is essential in fostering students' success.

### **Assessment and Evaluation Methodology**

I have decided to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods when administering my assessment and evaluation for both program scholars and staff. For scholars, I will be assessing their experience during two parts of the program. In the first part, which takes place during their junior and senior years in high school, I will focus on programming,

special events (e.g., their transition ceremonies and campus tours), and engagement. Scholars will receive these program assessments/evaluations towards the end of their junior year and then again towards the end of their senior year. During the second part of the program, which takes place during all four of their undergraduate years, I will focus on programming (e.g., staff, content, structure), special events, and support services. Scholars will receive these program assessments towards the end of each academic school year. Future assessments/evaluations will include a section on the peer mentor/mentee component I hope to institute if the program pilot seems to be a success. An example of the scholar assessments/evaluations can be found in Appendix A and B. For staff members, I will be assessing their program experience in the areas of student engagement, programming, special events, collaboration, barriers, and staff satisfaction. Off-site staff (e.g., Program Coordinators) will receive their assessments/evaluations towards the end of the scholars' junior and senior year in high school. On-site staff (e.g., Program Advisors, Graduate Assistants, Program Directors, etc.) will receive their program assessments towards the end of each academic school year. Like the student assessment/evaluation, a section for feedback on the peer mentor/mentee component will be added contingent upon the program's success as a pilot. An example of the staff assessments/evaluations can be found in Appendix C.

### **Limitations**

As an African American, a member of an underserved population, and after dedicating my career to supporting underserved student populations for years, I found it befitting to focus my intervention program on African American foster care youth. According to the research discussed in Chapter 3, these students are in the MOST need of institutional support (Amechi, 2016). However, I do recognize that other foster care youth of color could truly benefit from the Yellow Brick Road Program. In the future, there could be a possibility to expand the program to those other foster care youths who are seeking higher education. Many foster care youth of color experience similar challenges, however, I understand the role that culture, language, and even religion may play when providing accommodation. In this case, this program may need to be tweaked or expanded so that it is intentional in providing support to all students of color. Farther in the future, there could also be some consideration for foster care youth who are not of color. Although this population has racial privilege, they still suffer from many of the plights foster care youth face. As previously mentioned, I would prefer that the Yellow Brick Road staff members identify as Black or African American. It is important that the staff members identify in this way or at the very least identify as a person of color. This would be of benefit when establishing trust and a relationship with the program Scholars. Depending on the location and the type of institution, this may be a challenge or limitation.

### **Recommendation**

The road to addressing the ghosts of our past will not be an easy one. There is a lot of work to be done so that this country can truly embody its claims of freedom, equality, and democracy. *The Yellow Brick Road Program* is my personal contribution to combating hundreds of years of systemic racism, oppression, and poverty within my community. I

know that it will take a lot more than just my program to fix the issue, however, I believe this program is a good start and will inspire African American youth to fight for their true freedom—education. As a student affairs professional, I believe it is my job and the job of those alike to ensure that all who seek a higher education receive it. Freedom—education is a right, not a privilege. Until we can ensure that everyone can access and exercise this right, we can never truly say we are the land of the free.

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