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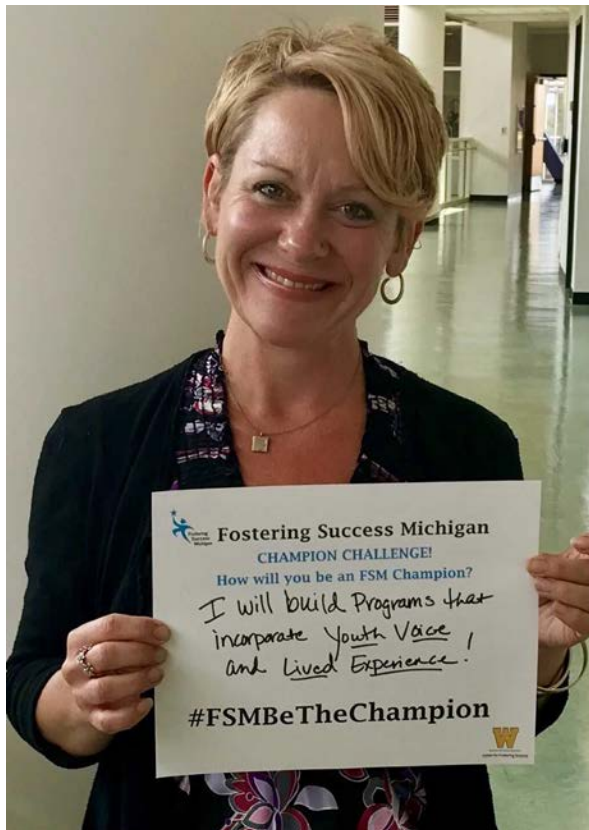
Best Practice, Best Fit

Webinar Series

Discovery Driven Solutions Related to Educational Attainment for Students from Foster Care

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SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS!

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- Technical difficulties? Contact Citrix team at 1-888-259-8414
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THANK YOU!

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UCONN
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

The Role of Attachment Style in College Persistence and Completion for Foster Care Youth

Nathanael Okpych, PhD

Assistant Professor, UConn School of SW

Project Director, CalYOUTH Study

100
17-year-olds in foster care

84
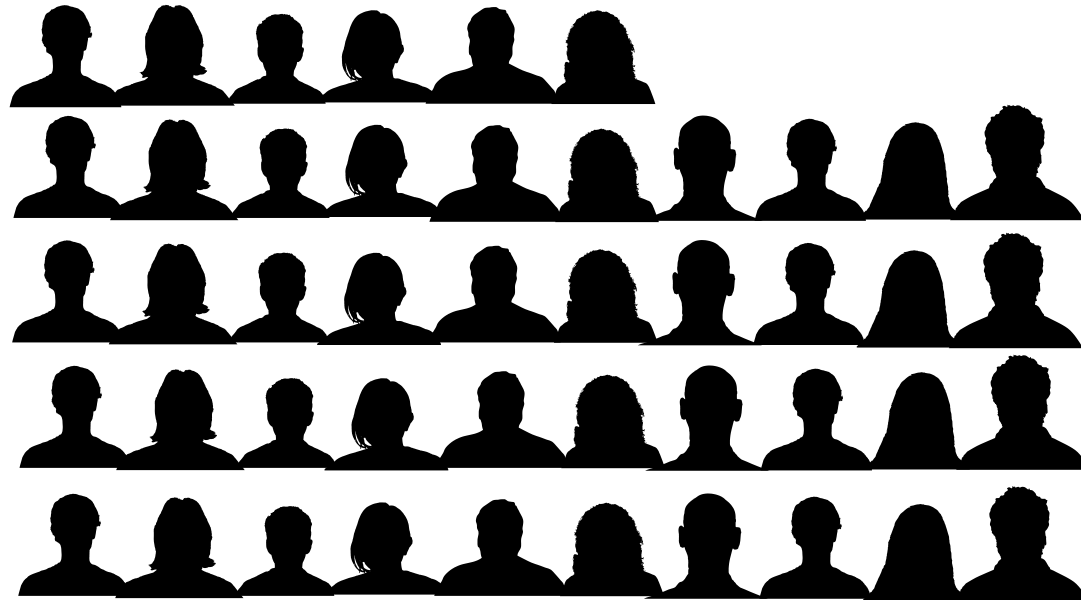**Aspire to go to college**

40
Enroll in college by age 25/26

8
Earn 2yr/4yr degree by age 25/26

Sources: Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Courtney et al., 2011

College completion rates by age 25/26

46 %
U.S. Youth
(Add Health Study)

8 %
Foster Youth
(Midwest Study)

Source: Courtney et al., 2011

Barriers to College Completion

Barriers Suggested by Research[1]

- Academically underprepared
  - Past school quality, education disruptions
  - Need for remediation in college
- Precarious financial situation
- Limited social capital (e.g., navigating college, emotional support)
- Other life demands (child care, work, etc.)
- Mental health/substance use issues
- While in college, FC services/support phase out

Less Visible Barriers

- *Possible lasting psychosocial effects of loss and trauma[1]*
  - These issues affect youth's likelihood of seeking/using help, even when it's available

[1] e.g., Courtney et al., 2011; Okpych, 2012; Pecora, 2012; Salazar et al., 2016;
[2] Norton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008

Adult Attachment Styles

- Several qualitative studies of foster youth describe the adoption of a self-protective stance in response to trauma and ruptured relationships[1]

- Exemplify what developmental psychologists call "avoidant attachment" style

[1] Kools, 1999; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015; Morton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008

Adult Attachment Styles

- Attachment theory in childhood[1]
  - Durable patterns of relationship expectations, emotions, and behaviors formed from early infant-caregiver interactions

- Attachment styles generally stable over time, but can be influenced by experiences later in life:

  "They can be altered by powerful experiences that affect a person's beliefs about the value of seeking help from attachment figures and the feasibility of attaining safety, protection, and comfort" (Mikulincer et al., p.85).

- Severe maltreatment and relational instability in foster care (e.g., frequent placement changes) exemplify such "powerful experiences" that can shake one's sense of safety, stability, and basic trust in relationships

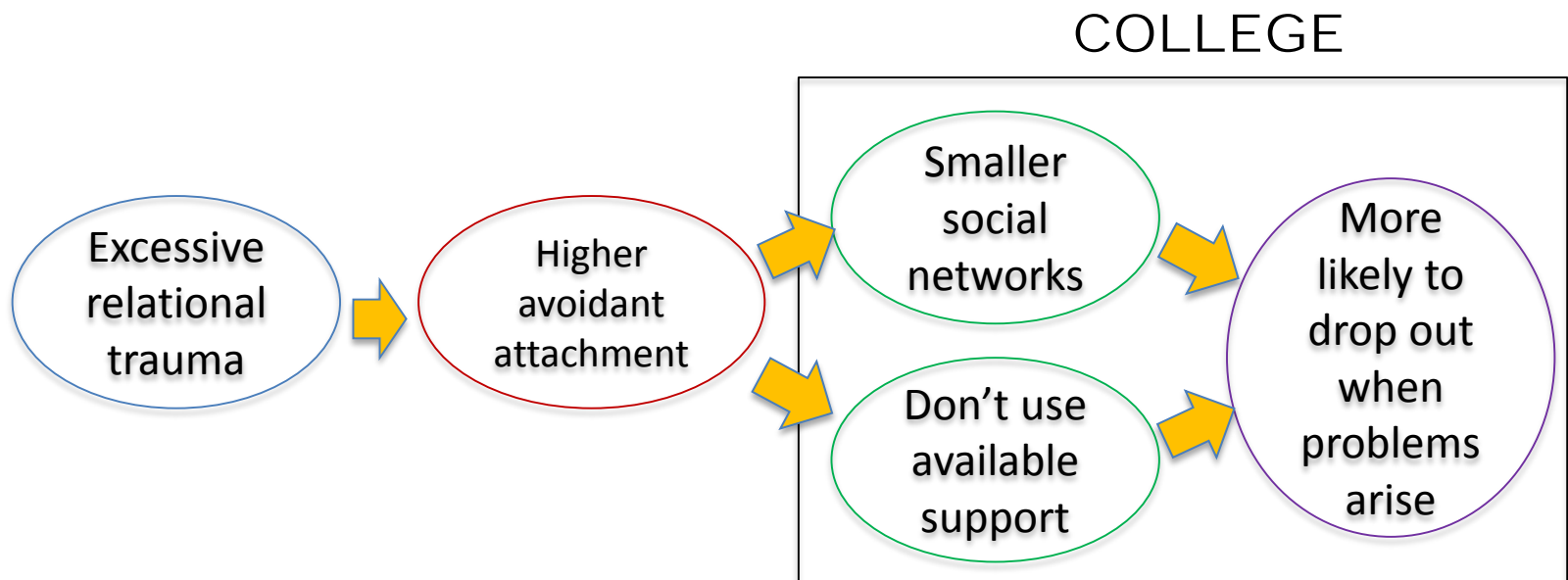[1] Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1973

Adult Attachment Styles

- Adult attachment styles measured on two dimensions:
  - **Anxious**—concern that relationships with others will be severed
  - **Avoidant**—preoccupation with maintaining distance from others
- Low on both dimensions—secure attachment style

- Several qualitative studies with foster care youth exemplify "avoidant attachment"

- Avoidant attachment characterized by a tendency to
  - Avoid intimacy and emotional closeness
  - Minimize dependence on others by being highly self-reliant
  - Downplay threats
  - Suppress acknowledgement of personal faults and shortcomings

[1] Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1973

Connecting the Dots:
Avoidant Attachment and College Persistence

- Most foster youth enter college in precarious situation
- Connections to resourceful adults and peers at college will be instrumental to their success
- Avoidant attachment can compromise youth's social support

COLLEGE

Excessive relational trauma → Higher avoidant attachment → Smaller social networks → More likely to drop out when problems arise

Higher avoidant attachment → Don't use available support → More likely to drop out when problems arise

Current Study: Questions

1. Does past relational trauma (school changes, foster care placement changes) predict higher avoidant attachment?

2. Does higher avoidant attachment decrease odds of college persistence? Of graduating?

3. Is the relationship between avoidant attachment and college outcomes mediated (explained) by amount of social support youth have around the time they're in college?

Data and Analyses

Midwest Study
- 2002 – 2011 (five waves)
- Wave 1: 732 adolescents (age 17) in foster care 6+ months in IA, IL, WI
- College outcomes: National Student Clearinghouse data (2015), cross-checked with self-report from MWS

Samples
- Persistence: 331 youth in NSC data
- Degree completion: 329 youth who could be observed for at least 6 years
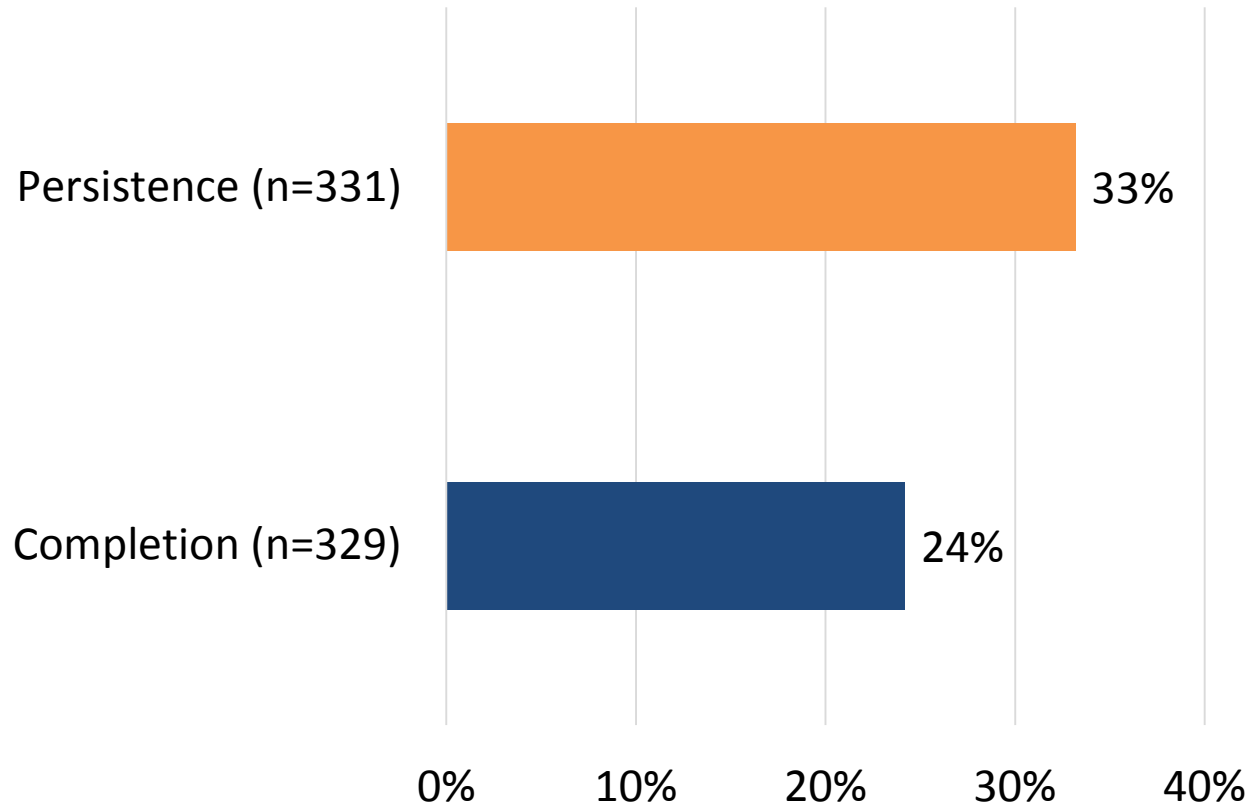
Analyses
- Avoidant attachment & other controls (age 17) to predict college outcomes
  - Controls: demographics, education history, behavior problems, behavioral health, & maltreatment/foster care history, college selectivity
  - Mediator: social support at MWS interview closest to when youth entered college
  - Outcomes: persisted for first 3 consecutive semesters, completed 2yr/4yr degree
- Logistic regression
- Multiple imputation to address missing data

Avoidant Attachment Measure

- Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R)
  - 36 items (18 for avoidance, 18 for anxious)
- ECR-R modifications in MWS
  - Shortened (11 items each dimension)
  - Asked about relationships in general, not romantic relationships

- Avoidant attachment (11 items, measured age 17/18)
  - E.g., I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down
  - E.g., I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others
  - Response options on seven point Likert scale: 1=Strongly disagree to 7=Strongly agree

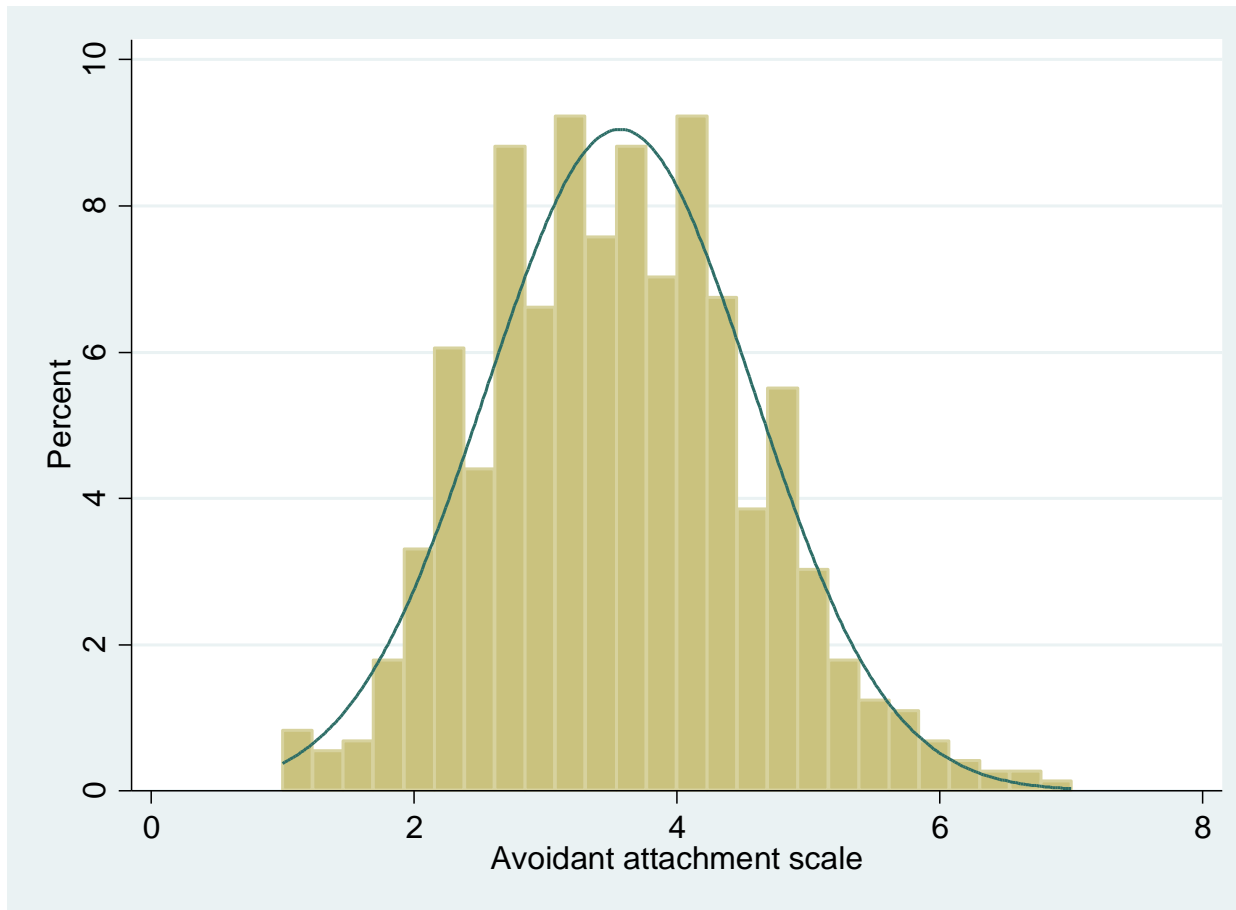 - Chronbach's alpha = .77 (good internal consistency)

Findings

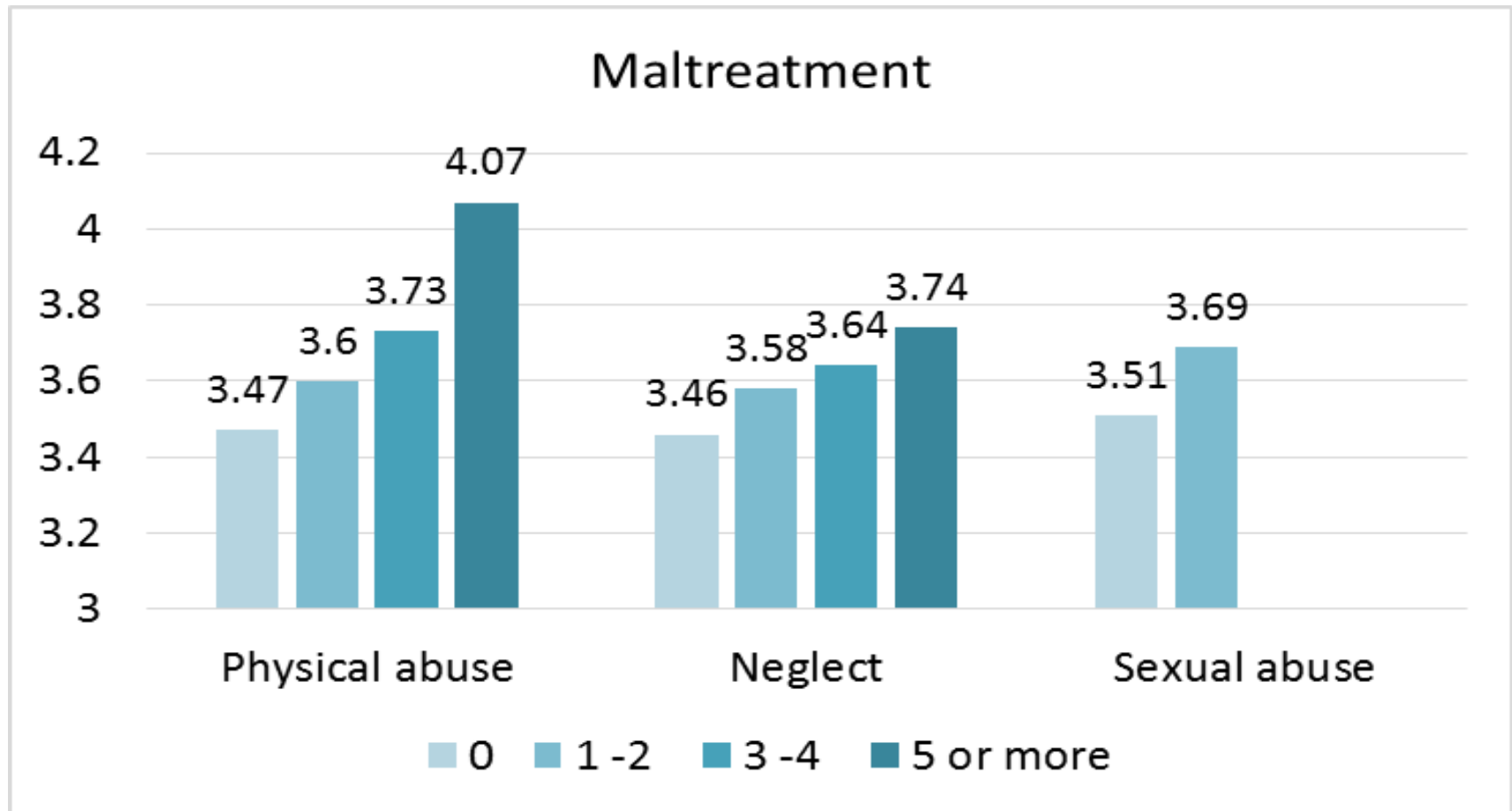# Outcomes among Youth in College

Avoidant Attachment

Figure 1. Distribution of Avoidant Attachment Scores (n = 726)

Mean = 3.58
SD = 1.02

Past Maltreatment and Avoidant Attachment

Figure 2. Average Avoidant Attachment Scores for Different Amounts of Maltreatment, by Maltreatment Type (n = 732)

Past Maltreatment and Relational Instability

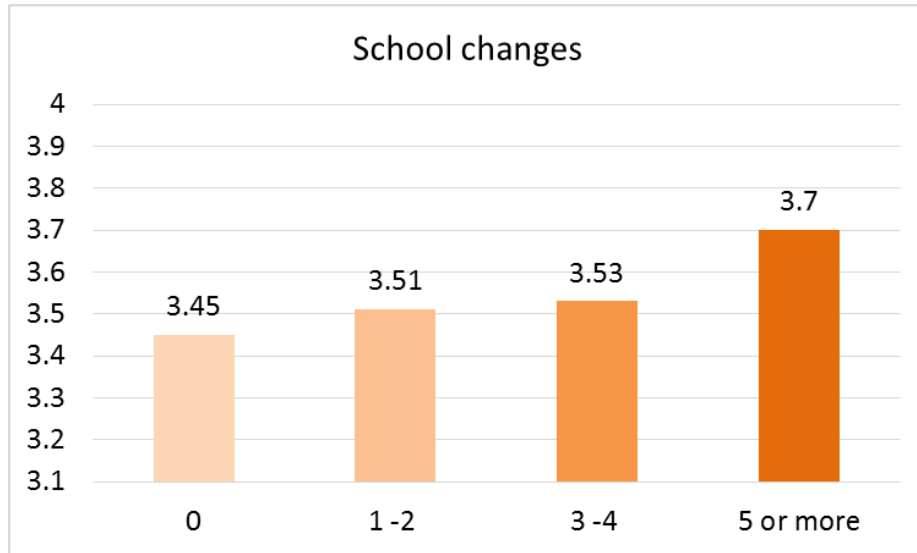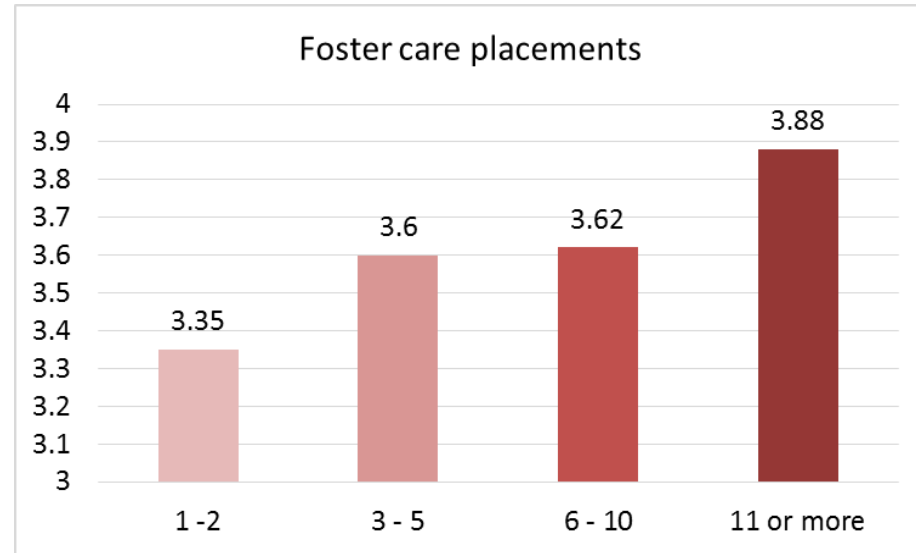*Figure 3. Average Avoidant Attachment Score by Number of School Changes (*n = 732*)*

School changes

0	1 -2	3 -4	5 or more
3.45	3.51	3.53	3.7

*Figure 4. Average Avoidant Attachment Score by Number of Foster Care Placements (*n = 732*)*

Foster care placements

1 -2	3 - 5	6 - 10	11 or more
3.35	3.6	3.62	3.88

Avoidant Attachment and College [Outc]omes

	Persistence (n = 331)			2/4yr Degree Completion (n=329)	
	Odds Ratio	p		Odds Ratio	p
	0.71	.006		0.69	.012
	0.74	.053		0.67	.038
...ediator	0.73	.079		0.71	.115

Interpretation: For each 1-point increase in AA on the 7-point scale, the expected **odds** of persistence decreases by 29%. (1-.71=.29)

Simpler Interpretation: Youth higher in AA are less likely to persist than youth lower in AA.

*Controls include:
Demographics: Gender, Race/ethnicity, Age, State, Age first enrolled, Parental status
Educational history: Highest completed grade, Reading score, Grade repetition, Special Education, Expulsion, Number of college prep activities, College aspirations
Behavioral problems: Delinquency score, Ever in congregate care
Behavioral health: Mental health problems, Alcohol/substance use problems
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Institutional factor: College type/selectivity

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Avoidant Attachment and College Outcomes

- Hypothetical example to demonstrate probability of persisting through first 3 semesters

Average AA
Probability of persisting:
33%

1 SD higher on AA
Probability of persisting:
27%

Summary

- Youth who experienced more maltreatment and instability had higher levels of avoidant attachment at age 17/18

- In turn, higher levels of avoidant attachment decreased odds of persistence and degree completion
  – Net of many other factors
  – Note: not presented here – Anxious Attachment not significantly related to college outcomes

- Relationship between avoidant attachment and college outcomes explained in part by social support

Limitations

- Attachment style measure
  - Some items omitted from scale
  - Measured at age 17/18, not before entering college
- Social support (mediator)
  - Broadly measured (perceived availability)
  - Did not capture suspected mechanisms—social network size, use of available supports
- Findings generalize across time and region?

Implications

- Attachment style appears to be one piece of the pie in influencing college outcomes
  - Important, because available resources/supports only work if youth use them
- May need to address attachment issues as part of intervention with foster youth
  - Treat underlying trauma
  - Normalize help-seeking
  - Opportunities to develop connections to resourceful adults and peers
- Research: more detail about potential mechanisms

THANK YOU!

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Thank you for attending!

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- If you have a research study that you are interested in presenting via this series, please contact Karie Ward at karie.j.ward@wmich.edu

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