



Positive Attributes of Foster Care That Promote Access to Higher Education

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Executive Summary

A college education in American society is linked to higher levels of income, healthier living, increased citizen engagement, and more job opportunities. Former foster youth, however, are less likely than other U.S. youth to earn a college degree. Much has been written about the barriers foster youth face as they make their way to college, but less is known about the positive attributes of care that may contribute to their higher education success. This study, conducted by undergraduate students affiliated with Berkeley Hope Scholars at U.C. Berkeley, includes a sample of former foster youth attending college at one of the nine University of California campuses. Based on a survey, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, this project aims to identify foster care characteristics that support students' educational trajectories to higher education. Findings suggest that caregivers and other mentors who provide psychological and emotional encouragement, educational assistance, and who signal high expectations may promote students' academic talents. Other important assets include social services programs (e.g., ILSP), supportive social workers, and stable foster care placements. The findings underscore the importance of recruiting highly effective foster caregivers, as well as intentional efforts to recruit highly effective teachers and ancillary educational professionals to support students on their academic journey. Efforts to engage foster youth in their education and to support their opportunities for higher education must continue to be pursued.

Introduction

A college education in American society is linked to higher levels of income, healthier living, increased citizen engagement, and more job opportunities (Baum et al., 2013). Considering that some adults with a foster care history may experience difficult life events such as unemployment or underemployment, economic insecurity, substance abuse, emotional disorders, homelessness, or incarceration (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003), a higher level of education can be a protective factor by positioning these adults to engage in more positive life experiences. Society's favorable orientation towards a college education has contributed to an increase in research on former foster youth pursuing a post-secondary education, with topics ranging from readiness, access, preparation, and support prior to college; and postsecondary programs and support for foster care alumni (see review by Geiger & Beltran, 2017).

Although many young people who experienced foster care have aspirations of earning a college degree (Courtney et al., 2001; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Jones, 2010; McMillen et al., 2003; Reilly, 2003), only a very small percentage of these young people actualize their dreams. Compared to their peers in the general population, foster youth transitioning to adulthood have lower rates of secondary and postsecondary educational attainment (see, for example, California College Pathways, 2015; Day et al., 2011; Frerer et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2012). At ages 23 or 24, nearly one-quarter of foster youth participants in one large-scale study (The "Midwest study") had neither a high school diploma nor a GED (24%), compared to less than 10 percent of participants (7%) in a nationally representative sample of young adults (Courtney et al., 2010). Rates of postsecondary education enrollment and completion were also lower for youth in the Midwest Study than for youth in the general population. Another recent large-scale study of foster youth in California (The "CalYOUTH study") has similar findings. Following implementation of a law extending access to foster care to age 21 in California, Courtney found that college enrollment and completion rates for former foster youth still lagged behind rates for the general public. Among foster youth attending college, the majority of enrolled students were also more likely to pursue a 2-year rather than 4-year college degree (Courtney et al., 2018). As a more appropriate comparison, findings from other studies examining former foster youth and other vulnerable youth such as low-income or first-generation students suggest that former foster youth have relatively poorer educational outcomes (Day et al., 2011; Frerer et al., 2013). Research has explored factors that influence college enrollment for foster youth (Gillum et al., 2016; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Pecora, 2012). Overall, personal attributes, academic history, educational aspirations, and connections to resourceful adults have been found to promote college enrollment while certain foster care experiences (e.g., residential and school instability while in foster care) and other life factors (e.g., parenting, history of juvenile justice involvement, mental health problems) decrease the expected likelihood of college enrollment (for a review, see Okpych & Courtney, 2019). Despite the growing evidence on the importance of intrapersonal characteristics and college campus supports for the educational success of former foster youth, there is a dearth of research on the impact of foster parents on the educational success of former foster youth.

Foster care experiences

The experience of foster care may support students' aspirations for higher education, or may create barriers to higher educational attainment. A number of studies show associations between children's foster care experiences and higher education outcomes. In particular, the data suggest that disruptions in educational placements, placement instability, re-entries to care, high rates of suspensions and expulsions, and poor quality alternative educational programs (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Gillum et al., 2016; Pecora et al., 2006) may contribute to poor educational outcomes during high school and college. These foster care experiences, of course, may be more likely for children experiencing elevated mental or behavioral health concerns, thus suggesting selection effects associated with these outcomes (McGuire et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005). One study found that providing youth who are exiting care with a broad foundation in life skills and some concrete resources upon leaving care significantly reduced negative educational outcomes after leaving care (Pecora et al., 2006).

Research suggests that spending more time in extended foster care is associated with an increased likelihood that youth will enroll in college by age 21, but has not been found to be associated with persistence or degree completion (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Okpych et al., 2019). Being enrolled in school or being employed is a requirement associated with remaining in foster care in most states so it is likely not the extension of support that drives college enrollment rates. Instead, it may be a blend of various other key factors developed and accumulated while in foster care that contribute to academic success.

Factors associated with college success among former foster youth

Personal characteristics associated with higher education success

A number of studies indicate the importance of positive personal characteristics and educational aspirations in the educational outcomes of former foster youth. Hass and Graydon (2009) interviewed a sample of former foster care youth with post-secondary educational success (i.e., 57% had graduated from a post-secondary institution and 93% currently attended a post-secondary school) and found that planfulness, a sense of purpose, and self-confidence were critical to college persistence. Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) also interviewed 14 former foster youth attending a 4-year university and found that these youth consistently showed clear intellectual ability and some form of internal locus of control coupled with a strong goal orientation. Moreover, Hines and colleagues (2005) emphasized that in addition to these individual-level factors, family and community level-factors were integral to understanding the developmental pathways of these youth.

Other foster youth characteristics highlight the capacity to persevere in higher education. One study interviewed former foster youth about turning points in their lives that led them to complete a post-secondary educational program or achieve at least junior standing in a four-year institution (Haas et al., 2014). Similar to Hines and colleagues' (2005) findings, results suggested that in addition to a young person's sense of autonomy, social and instrumental support and access to system-level supports (e.g., school and foster care system supports) facilitated turning-point events in their lives to complete a college education. Another study highlighted the importance of successfully managing multiple life tasks in the educational success of emancipated foster youth. In interviews with emancipated foster youth who were enrolled in a

post-secondary program, Batsche et al. (2014) found an association between youths' GPA and the ability to manage multiple dimensions of their lives. Students with higher GPAs had stronger abilities to manage multiple dimensions of their lives; whereas, students with lower GPAs reported more difficulty with managing multiple life tasks, challenges with parenting their children, and stronger negative emotions toward their foster care experiences. In summary, these studies underscore the importance of person-level factors in the educational success of former foster youth.

In addition to the link between personal characteristics and college outcomes, there is also research demonstrating the enduring negative impact of trauma and child maltreatment on young people's psychosocial functioning and self-concept, which in turn compromises their ability to succeed in college. For example, past maltreatment places foster youth at increased risk of experiencing mental health and substance use problems (Deutsch et al., 2015; Havlicek et al., 2013). Maltreatment and ruptured relationships can also negatively impact these youth in less visible ways. For instance, repeated and profound experiences of loss and trauma result in some foster youth adopting a self-protective disposition to relationships (Kools, 1999; Morton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), which may severely compromise their ability to develop strong interpersonal relationships and supports while navigating their college education.

Some evidence points to low levels of self-esteem among maltreated children, which may stem from the internalization of abusive or neglectful experiences (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Taussig, 2002). Family dynamics before and after entering foster care, the degree of connectedness maintained with family members, and the experience of spending time in care are thought to have a lasting impact on identity development and, ultimately, identity acquisition (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Moss, 2009; Rustin, 2006). One of the earliest studies on identity involving teens residing in foster care revealed themes of a "devalued self" and perceived diminished social status from being a foster child (Kools, 1997). A more recent study reported that foster care alumnus' unhealthy self-perceptions could prevent them from successfully participating in post-secondary education (Watt, et al., 2013). In one study of former foster youth participating in a campus support program, participants were hesitant to disclose their foster youth identity to others (Kinarsky, 2017).

Various other studies demonstrate that some former foster youth face challenges in both exercising personal agency and acquiring an adult identity, both important qualities for a successful transition to higher education. For instance, interviews with young people who aged out of care in the UK revealed feelings of losing control, becoming disillusioned, and developing distrust in people as a result of frequent and unannounced moves in foster care (Gaskell, 2010). Youth described instances when they tried to influence the nature of the care they received by sharing their thoughts and desires with social workers, only to be ignored and unsupported (Gaskell, 2010). Studies of youth aging out of foster care in the U.S. have revealed similar frustrations at being given little opportunity to exercise agency while in care, yet high expectations about agency and control at the point of exit (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Table 1 summarizes findings from various studies describing the personal characteristics associated with college outcomes among former foster youth.

Table 1

Personal characteristics linked to positive college education outcomes

Personal characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to multi-task multiple dimensions of their lives• Autonomy• Clear intellectual ability• Determination• Comfort with identity as a foster youth• Internal locus of control• Personal agency• Planfulness• Positive attitude towards help-seeking• Resilience• Self-concept• Sense of purpose• Self-confidence• Self-esteem

Sources of support associated with higher education success

In addition to the personal characteristics that some foster youth may display, extensive research demonstrates that social supports are instrumental in propelling students to higher education. Sources of support linked to post-secondary education outcomes among former foster youth are likely multi-level and interactive, and may include university programs and assistance, educators, mentors, and foster family members.

Institutional supports. A number of colleges and universities now offer support programs to former foster youth, though their form and array of offerings vary significantly. Findings from studies associated with these programs indicate that academic support services (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, help selecting courses or a major, career advising), assistance in finding housing, scholarships, emergency financial assistance, mental health services, and staff who serve as advocates can address students' unmet needs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hass et al., 2014; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Early research from one study may indicate that receiving an educational and training voucher and participating in a campus support program may increase the odds of persisting through the first two semesters in college (Okpych et al., 2020). One study found that a group of former foster youth who completed post-secondary two-year, four-year, or vocational programs used academic supports less often than did their peers who dropped out (Sim et al., 2008), though baseline assessments of student preparedness were not available and may have contributed to the study findings. One study conducted surveys with students and foster youth community college liaisons, and interviews with community college program staff to learn how colleges in California support their students who come from foster care (Rassen et al., 2010). In the study, the majority of the students described resources such as Chafee grants and financial aid, and independent living programs (ILPs) as the most helpful.

Social supports. Social supports developed while in foster care and while attending college are also critical in the post-secondary success of former foster youth (Ahrens et al., 2008; Haas et al., 2014; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines et al., 2005; Morton, 2016; Rios & French, 2008). One

study found that the number of institutional agents who former foster youth identified, as well as encouragement from school personnel, significantly increased the likelihood of college enrollment (Okpych & Courtney, 2017). Hass and Graydon (2009) found that people working in foster care agencies including therapists or counselors and mentors significantly helped former foster youth while in college.

Table 2

Sources of support linked to college education outcomes

Sources of support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic support • Assistance in finding housing, financial assistance, mental health services • Mentors • People who advocate for youth in higher education institutions • Therapists or counselors

Foster parents' role in youths' educational success

In addition to the general social supports foster youth may need to experience educational success, some evidence indicates that resource parents can be influential as well. However, most of the current evidence speaks to the influence of resource parents on K-12 educational success compared to their influence on post-secondary educational success. Additionally, the current evidence on the impact of caregivers on K-12 academic outcomes among foster youth is mixed. One study compared academic and social-emotional competence among 85 maltreated children placed in out-of-home care and 56 matched, non-maltreated community children between the ages of 3-6 years old (Pears et al., 2010). Findings suggest that across both domains, maltreated children lagged significantly behind their non-maltreated counterparts. Although there was some evidence to suggest that the effect of maltreatment on social competence is mediated by caregiver involvement with school-related activities, a similar mediating effect of caregiver involvement on academic competence was not found. Rather, children's own inhibitory control abilities explained a greater party of children's academic competency.

Another study examined whether caregiver involvement accounted for why some youth demonstrated better academic outcomes than others in a sample of 10-15-year old youth in foster care (Cheung et al., 2012). Multilevel analysis was used to examine placement-specific effects (i.e., caregiver involvement with academic support at home; number of books accessible to youth at home; caregiver school-based involvement; caregiver academic expectations) and child-specific effects (i.e., age, externalizing behaviors, deviation from caregiver academic expectations) on youth's academic success. Variance in youths' academic scores was partitioned into distinct between placement and child-specific variance components. Findings revealed that while individual differences in academic success were primarily attributable to child-specific effects (85%), 15% of the variance was attributable to placement-level effects. This finding suggests that aside from placement-level processes that operate on all youth from the same placement, unique experiences of individual children also influence school success.

Contrary to expectation, caregiver school-based involvement was not significantly associated with academic achievement in youth in care. These results converge with those reported by Pears

et al. (2010) where authors did not find any evidence to suggest that the association between out-of-home care and academic achievement can be explained by caregiver school-based involvement. It may be that higher levels of home-based involvement reflect healthy relationships shared between foster caregivers and youth. Previous research demonstrates that placements characterized by high quality caregiver–youth relationships are more stable and permanent in nature (e.g., Orme & Buehler, 2001). Lastly, higher levels of foster caregiver academic expectations and youth's own academic expectations were both associated with more academic success. Over and above the effects of caregiver expectations within the same placement, children's academic expectations also predicted higher academic achievement. It may be that for youth who experience higher levels of caregiver expectations, they are more likely to internalize higher aspirations which in turn results in higher academic achievement.

Wise et al. (2010) examined care system impacts on K-12 academic outcomes among Australian youth. Regression analyses indicated that a foster caregiver's capacity to support education was positively related to overall achievement, and foster parent help with homework was also positively linked to working hard at school. The survey results showed that foster parents had considerable positive input into children's learning, as indicated by the importance they place on good grades, help with homework and the structure of the home learning environment. Another study examined placement, protective and risk factors in the educational success of 1106 young people in care in Ontario, Canada between the ages of 12-17 years (Flynn et al., 2013). They found that caregiver attitudes and behavior were related to youths' educational success (i.e., youth's average marks and the youth's school performance in reading, math, science and overall, as rated by his or her caregiver). Caregiver involvement in a greater number of school activities also predicted significant improvement in the youths' average marks. These results are consistent with Jackson and Ajayi's (2007) position that caregivers are an important resource for improving educational outcomes among youth in care.

Very few studies have demonstrated the positive impact of resource parents and biological parents in the educational trajectories of former foster youth. In one study, 11 of 24 former foster youth credited foster parents, described as authoritative, as the reason for their academic success (Rios & French, 2008). When foster parents were strict, provided stability, and were involved in their foster children's education, foster youth progressed academically. In addition, 14 participants in their study referred to biological relatives as providing support. Biological relatives were mentioned as part of the youth's community, as opposed to their household; they emerged as the primary sources of community-related support.

A second study interviewed former foster youth and also found foster parents made significant, positive contributions to their academic success (Morton, 2016). Although the participants in this study had numerous foster care placements over the course of their time in care, each had one placement experience that made a significant difference in their life. For the majority of participants, their last placement is where these positive experiences were expressed. Each found academic support, encouragement, and assistance from these foster parents in everything from after-school activities to college applications. Through their stories, it was clear that their definition of family had expanded to include those outside of biological connections. The relationship with foster parent(s) continued even after leaving care, including holiday gatherings, birthday celebrations, random dinners, and a place to call home. For these 11 participants, a

place to consistently look to as “home” afforded them the ability to forge significant relationships while also maintaining their own sense of independence and self-reliance. These relationships contributed to a feeling of security.

Studies of foster parents’ perspectives on children’s educational experience indicate that they expect more from school systems than what foster children typically receive. In one study (Zetlin et al., 2010), foster caregivers described feeling disappointed by a perceived lack of guidance from school staff for foster youth overall, particularly in relation to graduation and post-graduation plans. Foster parents discussed their desire for school staff to engage foster youth in discussions about graduation requirements, college planning, and financial aid applications to enhance the likelihood that they will attend post-secondary education.

Caregiver characteristics have also been examined in relation to educational outcomes of foster youth, but most studies show null results. Neither caregiver age, gender (Wise et al., 2010), social class (Heath et al., 1994), single parent status, SES (Berger et al., 2009), or educational background (Berger et al., 2009, Pears et al., 2010; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994; Wise et al., 2010; Zima et al., 2000) have a relationship with children’s educational outcomes. Taken together, the findings of these studies suggest that caregivers can play an important role in supporting the educational attainment and success of both current and former foster youth.

Summary

Combined, the literature describing how and to what extent foster care can or does contribute to children’s educational success is limited. This study is designed to solicit the views of former foster youth attending elite California universities about their experiences in care, and the positive attributes of care that may have contributed to their educational success.

Methods

This study draws on a sample of former foster youth in California who have made positive transitions to college and examines the characteristics of foster care that contribute to positive outcomes. Participants for this study were recruited from the nine UC campuses and include former foster youth who participate in campus-based support programs. At UC Berkeley, these programs are called "Berkeley Hope Scholars" though their name designations may be different at other universities (e.g., UCLA Bruin Guardian Scholar).

This project uses a mixed-methods approach to collect data. Former foster youth were surveyed, interviewed one-on-one, or participated in focus groups to discuss the attributes of their foster care experience that encouraged them to pursue higher education and assisted them in making a positive transition to adulthood. The project aims to identify foster care characteristics that support students’ educational trajectories to higher education.

The Berkeley Hope Scholars undergraduate student research team designed a survey using Qualtrics containing twenty-eight questions to select students into the study and collect background information. The study is limited to college students who experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday and who were in care for a minimum of six months. The survey also included questions about extracurricular activities and transitional support programs in which

students participated in high school. Transfer students were asked a series of additional questions about their experiences navigating community college, counseling, and financial aid.

UC Foster Youth Campus Support Program coordinators were given instructions to distribute the survey to the student participants of their campus program. Although evidence from a UC-wide report indicates that approximately 1,800 former foster youth enrolled in the nine UC campuses in 2019 (UCOP, 2020), only 89 students responded to the survey.

Students completing the survey were asked to participate in a focus group or one-on-one interview conducted via Zoom. Focus groups were led by two student researchers facilitating no more than four subjects, and each focus group was composed only of students from the same university. Three focus groups were conducted, including a total of eight students. Four student participants preferred participating in one-on-one interviews. In total, the study gathered responses from 12 student participants (n=12). Questions were open-ended and focused on the positive aspects of students' foster care experience that promoted students' academic success. Qualtrics and Excel were used to examine descriptive statistics on survey respondents. Prior to data analysis, data cleaning was performed to ensure data integrity across respondents. Dedoose qualitative software was used to examine text data from the interviews and focus groups. The interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was performed.

Limitations

There are significant limitations to this research. Data collection for this study was very difficult. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were participating in their university coursework online, greatly affecting the response rate. Researchers could not control survey solicitation, so we cannot be assured that students were even notified about the study. Indeed, we did not have any respondents from two of the nine campuses, suggesting that the solicitation may not have occurred.

Survey Findings

Across the nine UC campuses, 163 students participated in the on-line survey, however, only 89 respondents fit the study criteria (i.e., in care on or after their 13th birthday and in care for six months or longer) and were therefore included.

Participants were asked to identify all of the placement types they experienced in care. The three most common placements the respondents experienced while in care were: Foster care with a non-relative/ foster placement with stranger (26.8%); Kinship care/ foster placement with extended family (24.6%); or Group care / residential care (16.2%). The three placement settings where respondents spent the most time while in care were: Foster care with a non-relative/ foster placement with stranger (37.1%); Kinship care/ foster placement with extended family (33.7%); and Foster care with known adult (14.6%).

Students' duration in care varied significantly as shown in Table 3. An important minority of the sample experienced especially long durations of stay.

Table 3: Duration in care

Duration in care	% of sample
Less than 2 years	27.4%

3 - 6 years	39.2%
7 – 10 years	14.3%
10+ years	19.1%

A large majority of respondents (78.5%) indicated considerable placement stability during their high school years – a departure from the instability that frequently characterizes children’s foster care trajectories. Almost one-quarter of respondents indicated zero placement instability during high school and somewhat more than half of respondents (54.6%) indicated a single placement change. Notably, about one-fifth (20.5%) of respondents indicated that they experienced five or more placements while in high school. Mirroring the relative stability of students’ placement experiences, almost half (49.4%) of respondents indicated that they only attended one high school, however, 20.2% of respondents stated that they attended four or more high schools.

Student characteristics

The majority of respondents (59%) identified as freshmen/ first years and 41% of the respondents identified as transfer students. Of the transfer students, 45.5% identified as re-entry students over the age of 25 years. Somewhat less than one-fifth of respondents (15.9%) identified as a student parent during high school and/or during college.

Access to Resources and Support

About half of respondents (51.7%) indicated that they had access to college advising during high school, and another 40.9% of respondents indicated that they participated in college preparatory programs while in high school. Another 42.1% of respondents indicated that they received college or admission mentorship while in high school. About half of respondents (53.4%) indicated that their peers positively influenced their knowledge of, interest in, and desire for higher education while in high school.

About half of respondents (49.4%) indicated that they received services from a therapist and/or psychologist/psychiatrist while in high school. Of the respondents that did not receive services, 75.6% indicated that they believed they either needed or would have benefited from these services while in care.

Focus Group / Interview Findings

The qualitative analysis derived 4 thematic codes, or categories, to organize the data. The categories included: (1) encouragement, (2) educational assistance, (3) high expectations, and (4) social services.

The qualitative findings indicated that *encouragement* was the positive aspect of foster care that was cited most frequently in helping students achieve academic success. Encouragement was described variously as being rewarded for strong academic performance, showing pride in a youth’s academic efforts, and general support for academic engagement.

Some students experienced considerable *educational assistance* from caregivers. This included emotional, psychological, and material supports, or support in completing important paperwork (e.g., FAFSA or college applications). Others noted the support they received engaging in extracurricular activities as part of the educational experience. Participants noted that

engagement in extracurricular activities offered further opportunities for achieving academic success and enjoying the school context. One respondent stated: “They gave me the opportunity to do sports for the first time ever.”

Other respondents spoke of caregivers who offered educational assistance through their engagement in the student’s academics. In one case, the respondent indicated that the caregiver transported the student to high school, could speak about her own experience in college, and spoke with the student regularly about school and its importance.

Respondents also spoke frequently about the importance of *high expectations*. Students spoke of caregivers who expected youth to eventually attend college. According to one respondent’s experience, foster care was “...the first place I’ve ever been in where college was a value set.”

In addition to the encouragement respondents received from kin and non-kin caregivers, some spoke of assistance they received from the larger *social service system*, including support from social workers, and others discussed the benefits of their Independent Living Skills program (ILSP).

Discussion

The sample described in this study included former foster youth attending elite colleges in California. The sample was notably different from the more typical profile of former foster youth who experience relatively short durations of stay in care, and who often experience considerable placement instability. Between two-fifths and one-half of respondents had received support from college counselors or mentors as they prepared for college, and almost half of students engaged in therapeutic services during high school to support their emotional and/or psychological well-being. It is unknown how these figures compare to foster youth who do not attend college. It may be that the additional assistance these students received from educational and psychological professionals, in addition to the stability of their care experience, were important to their academic trajectory.

According to their own assessment, the few respondents we spoke with suggested that the support they received from foster parents, social workers, educators and others – whether it was emotional, psychological, academic, or material – was influential to their ultimate educational path.

As other research has shown, mentorship or having a close family member or friend can be essential to students’ overall well-being. Findings from this study underscore that point: The path to college is challenging and all students need support to get there. Foster youth, who may be deprived of some of the supports that other students take for granted, may be especially well positioned to take advantage of the positive encouragement that kin and non-kin caregivers can offer.

The findings, of course, also underscore the importance of recruiting highly effective foster caregivers, as well as intentional efforts to recruit highly effective teachers and ancillary educational professionals to support students on their academic journey. Efforts to engage foster youth in their education and to support their opportunities for higher education must continue to

be pursued.

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