

**COVID-19 and Digital Adoption: Impact of Access to Post-Secondary Education for Former Youth in
Care on the Tuition Waiver Program**

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Abstract

I am honoured and blessed for the opportunity to teach, learn, live, work, research, and share knowledge on the traditional lands of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. This paper is set within the context of my position as a Financial Aid Access Specialist in Nanaimo, British Columbia, where I provide individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports to former youth in care accessing the Tuition Waiver Program (TWP) at Vancouver Island University. As an M.Ed. student, I have been able to put into practice what I have learned to enhance my role as advocate, listener, advisor, and positive role model. In this paper, I claim that COVID-19 has imposed many changes in course delivery (e.g., online, hybrid, and face-to-face), impacting the ways in which TWP students adapt to online learning and intensifying an already complicated learning experience. Although online delivery has its advantages, TWP students are presented with a barrage of challenges, creating greater gaps in the digital divide, and adding to the stigma of being in care. I make this claim because post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to address institutional gaps through the provision of appropriate supports to meet the diverse needs of TWP students within an increasingly digital world. As institutions develop strategies to ensure the health and safety of students, staff, and faculty amidst the pandemic, they should also prioritize access to technology and relevant supports for TWP students in efforts to increase equity and access to education. This paper urges post-secondary institutions to prioritize targeted supports and services to increase access to digital resources and promote valuable learning outcomes. For these reasons, I advocate for an individualized, wrap-around, relationship-based approach when providing supports and services to TWP students to foster independence, connection, resilience, accessibility, and meaningful post-secondary learning experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Adoption, Access, Digital Divide, Former Youth in Care, Tuition Waiver Program, Post-Secondary Education

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Chapter One: Introduction

“In poverty, as in certain propositions in physics, starting conditions are everything.” (Ehrenreich, 2011, p. 27). This paper is about enhancing and creating individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports to counter the impacts of COVID-19, digital adoption, and the growing digital divide on Tuition Waiver Program (TWP) students in higher education. Post-secondary institutions can pave smoother paths for those less fortunate through effective and impactful supports. This paper outlines the ways in which post-secondary institutions can holistically support TWP students in their educational journeys from beginning to end.

My Journey as a M.Ed. Student and an Advocate for Tuition Waiver Program Students

As an advocate and post-secondary support worker for underrepresented students, I believe in creating a positive, safe, inclusive, and stigma-free space for those seeking educational pathways in efforts to break the cycle of poverty, trauma, addiction, and abuse derived from the foster care system. As a M.Ed. student, I have had many profound learning experiences that inform the ways in which I provide support and advocacy for former youth in care accessing the TWP at Vancouver Island University (VIU). The stark reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing digital divide reveals the privileges bestowed upon me as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, and educated female, endowing me with an array of benefits and advantages typically not shared with those who fall outside of these parameters. For the purposes of my role, I acknowledge my position of power and privilege representing unique, diverse, and underrepresented populations who encounter a multitude of systemic barriers every day. Because of my white privilege, I have managed to bypass the unfortunate pandemic-induced consequences of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and other socioeconomic issues. I carry this awareness as a reminder to regularly check in on my biases, assumptions, and stereotypes to ensure my supports are guided by impartiality, compassion, empathy, understanding, and immense respect.

Developing my Interest in this Topic

My interest started two and a half years ago when I joined the Financial Aid and Awards team as a Financial Aid Access Specialist to promote the TWP, enhance financial literacy, and boost access to education and overall educational outcomes within an open access institution. My curiosity and passion grew as I discovered the impacts of COVID-19—in addition to the cycle of adversity and stigma—on the educational experiences of former youth in care, inspiring my search to find holistic supports that minimize barriers, while promoting equity and access to education. Because of a dysfunctional foster care system—often devoid of compassion and care—many TWP students enter higher education intimidated and overwhelmed, with aversions to ask for or receive help for fear of humiliation, rejection, stigmatization, or re-traumatization. To change this fear of vulnerability and break the perpetuation of struggling in silence, post-secondary institutions need to adopt proactive helping strategies that are infused with an ethic of care and consideration. The perpetuation of the hardship cycle is anxiety-inducing and demoralizing, emphasising the need for those in positions of privilege and power to be better helpers, supporters, and advocates when interacting with underserved populations in the post-secondary context.

Significance of the Topic

Education is opportunity, independence, and transformational. It is meant to transform lives for the better. It bestows many powers and opens doors, including lifting individuals from poverty, breaking dysfunctional cycles, healing trauma, and equipping people with necessary skills and knowledge to find fulfilling careers. Despite these benefits, individuals with lived experiences in care struggle to access and/or obtain post-secondary education. Reasons for this can vary, but I attribute these educational obstacles to the stigma of care and the aggravations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Words like “foster kid” carry a weight of false and negative assumptions that afflict self-identity and confidence. Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination—whether subtle or overt—are harmful, regardless of the extent.

Unfortunately, these internalized experiences and emotions are brought into the post-secondary context. Scarred by distressing and traumatic experiences from care, TWP students encounter their post-secondary journeys with a mixture of positive and negative perceptions, emphasizing the need for targeted, individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports.

The significant impacts of trauma, addiction, abuse, and stigma in care, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital divide, suggest that the rapid shift to digital adoption may have significant impacts on TWP students' overall educational experiences. The adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic not only increase inequities in higher education, but complicate an already intense and confounding educational experience, elucidating reasons behind students' feelings of frustration, overwhelm, and abandonment. Until post-secondary institutions reflect upon and change their own systems that undervalue and undermine marginalized populations, there will continue to be a need for roles like mine to help navigate an increasingly confusing, stigmatized, and barriered educational system. If anything, post-secondary institutions need to amp up their supports to not only address the digital deficiency and its disparate impacts on TWP students but to focus on transitional supports to instill pragmatic approaches that reflect a sense of care and concern. The purpose of this paper is to enhance and create supports that counter the impacts of COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide to give TWP students a 'fair-shake' at achieving success, while fostering independence, connection, resilience, acceptance, accessibility, and meaningful learning experiences.

Presenting the Argument

In this paper, I argue that digital adoption over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly widened the digital divide for marginalized students because of digital resource inequities and inaccessible supports, tools, and resources. This paper claims that the digital divide—a perceived gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not—intensifies existing barriers for former youth in care who are accessing the TWP (Camillo & Longo, 2020; Fontaine, 2017). I make this

claim because TWP students are disproportionately impacted by the digital divide, which complicates access to necessary tools, supports, and resources and perpetuates—or even worsens—deficit perspectives and various socioeconomic disparities (Barber et al., 2021; Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2018; Czeck, 2015; Gorski, 2010; Iloh, 2018; Kovarikova, 2017; Kawalilak et al., 2012). The link between individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based approaches and positive educational outcomes for TWP students in higher education is based upon evidence from studies such as, Colacchio Wesley et al. (2020), Nadon (2020), Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2016), and Rutman and Hubberstey (2016).

This precipitous shift to online learning highlights the existing and novel challenges TWP students experience while attempting to navigate hybrid, online, and face-to-face formats in a pandemic-infected world. During the pandemic, many of us transitioned to remote settings without a hinge. We had access to high-speed internet, high-quality laptops, and affordable data plans—and if we did not—we had the capacity, the means, the ability, and the knowledge to get what was needed. Many of us were—and continue to be—blessed with secure jobs that offer flexible work schedules and the means to obtain necessary equipment, support, and technological devices to appease remote working conditions. However, there are populations who do not share these privileges. Disenfranchised populations are typically not connected to these convenient infrastructures and have become even more disconnected in this rapidly shifting digital age, emphasizing a gap in access between the haves and the have-nots (Fontaine, 2017). These digital inequities continue to evolve, creating multiple issues with access, such as types of access (Internet), capacities to use the technology, and ways to access tools, supports, and resources (Fontaine, 2017). This paper focuses on former youth in care accessing the TWP—a program that waives tuition fees for foster youth up to their first undergraduate degree—at VIU, an institution that supports universal access, especially for non-traditional learners who come from multiple sectors of society and face multiple barriers to post-secondary education (Financial Aid & Awards, n.d.; Vancouver Island University, n.d.). Using a blend of peer-reviewed journals, reports, gray literature, and my own

work experiences, this paper explores the impacts of COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide on TWP students. This paper also investigates the impacts of individualized, wrap-around, relationship-based supports on the well-being of TWP students to instill optimism, resilience, and normalcy within the context of post-secondary education.

Theoretical Framework

Guided by Gorski's (2010) deficit ideology, this paper argues that the power of mass perception fuels the foundation of mass compliance when the stereotype is successfully socialized into mainstream consciousness. I argue that former youth in care are victims of this ideology in post-secondary settings, adding to a complex layer of stigmatization that permeates individual, public, and institutional spheres, demonstrating that TWP students do not approach and/or experience education in the same unobstructed and optimistic manner as their parented peers.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

As there are various avenues to explore, the purposes of this paper, and within the context of supporting TWP students in their quest to attain post-secondary education, this literature review is divided into three sections. The first section outlines how COVID-19 and digital adoption have complicated access to higher education for TWP students. The second section provides an overview of the outcomes associated with former youth in care to give context when exploring typical and new pandemic-related barriers to education and relevant supports in an increasingly digital world. The last section suggests effective ways to close the gaps in higher education for TWP students. Research examining the impacts of COVID-19 and digital adoption on TWP students in higher education is sparse. This literature review examines how the complexities of lived realities in care impact TWP students' interactions with and adaptations to online learning and explores the benefits of individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based approaches when supporting TWP students within the context of COVID-19 and digital adoption.

COVID-19 and Digital Adoption in Higher Education

COVID-19 and the resulting shift to a blend of online formats has impacted all learners in various ways, particularly for alumni of care, who typically do not share the same privileges as their non-care counterparts when accessing resources to support transitions to online learning formats, suitable study spaces, and appropriate equipment or tools (Doreleyers & Knighton, 2020; Fontaine, 2017; Iloh, 2018). These educational experiences are further exacerbated by the compounded stresses of coping with the uncertainty and instability of the COVID-19 pandemic (Doreleyers & Knighton, 2020). Furthermore, financial vulnerabilities, food insecurities, and digital inequities have increased amid the pandemic, placing TWP students at greater risk of depression and anxiety (Amechi, 2020; Barber et al., 2021). Remote learning is not all bad, though, as it offers flexibility and affordability, advancing a viable and favourable option for many students in higher education.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning

Research consistently indicates that online learning is a viable alternative to face-to-face post secondary settings, because it is accessible to a broader range of learners, conducive to busy lifestyles, flexible, convenient, affordable, adaptable, innovative, practical, and generates closeness through discussion and communication (Iloh, 2018; Kauffman, 2015). Carlsen et al. (2016) contend that online learning not only promotes contact between students and faculty but increases access to education because it has the capacity to reach a wider range of potential learners and opens opportunities to interact within a digital landscape, giving access to digital resources that otherwise would be difficult to attain for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Czeck (2015) highlights the benefits of online learning for Indigenous learners, a population that is over-represented in the foster care system, as an opportunity to develop self-discipline, self-regulation, time management, computer literacy, autonomy, and work ethic, while providing access to specialized and qualified instructors (Kawalilak et al., 2012).

Although this shift to online formats can be flawless for some, it is important to recognize that these precipitous changes can be frustrating and overwhelming for others, particularly for disenfranchised groups (Camillo & Longo, 2020). Over the course of the pandemic, online learning has become more centric in student's lives, placing the pressures of learning on the individual, which requires a strong locus of control, written communication skills, self-awareness, time management, organization, planning, technological ability, and self-control (Kauffman, 2015). For TWP students, though, these characteristics can be difficult to acquire as they generally do not have access to positive and consistent support systems to help foster such attributes (Kauffman, 2015).

This shift to online formats forced many TWP students to contend with shared learning spaces, devices, and internet bandwidth, as they struggled to navigate COVID-amplified burdens including, job loss, financial instability, childcare/eldercare, illness, and mental health issues (Bozkurt et al., 2020;

Camillo & Longo, 2020; Carlsen et al., 2016; Czeck, 2015; Kauffman, 2015). One study compares face-to-face instruction with online learning, claiming that in-class formats offer more informative approaches as they present ways for Faculty to perceive students' levels of understanding based on non-verbal communication and facilitates modifications to teaching styles (Kauffman, 2015). Another study reports that Faculty also experience challenges with online learning as they attempt to navigate the digital world amid their own online teaching insecurities, connectivity issues, and inability to perceive students' reactions (Goin Kono & Taylor, 2021)

Adapting to new technology is never seamless—aside from the technical glitches and increased 'internet traffic,'—Wiederhold (2020) refers to an online side-effect, called 'zoom fatigue,' which is a "tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual videoconferencing platforms" (p. 437). Since COVID-19, the use of these virtual platforms has significantly increased because they offer safe alternatives to connect, study, and work, while upholding social distancing rules. This new phenomenon has little research; however, the side effects are concerning, as they could influence some students to break from technology, potentially increasing risks for loneliness, isolation, and institutional neglect.

While online learning can be accessible, innovative, feasible, and a way to promote adaptability in a changing world, the format feeds into a digital gap between those who have digital access and those who do not (Fontaine, 2017; Iloh, 2018). In the context of an emergency shift to remote learning initiatives within post-secondary institutions that serve historically underrepresented students, it is essential to determine the ways in which the digital divide is confounding and worsening their online learning experiences.

Disparate Impacts of the Digital Divide on Tuition Waiver Program Students

Studies indicate that the digital divide significantly impacts low income, first-generation, and other minorities (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2018). Adding to the digital divide is that of the 'material divide,' which signifies a division between those who have the resources to purchase digital devices, software,

and other equipment and those who do not (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Statistics Canada (Tamarack Institute, 2021) reports that only 62 percent of Canadians in the lowest income bracket have access to the Internet in comparison to 95 percent of those in the highest income bracket. As TWP students are marginalized and typically fall into the lowest income quartile and possess lower educational levels, it is no surprise that they are one of the most impacted populations by this divide. Helsper and van Deursen (2017) argue that “education and income are the most consistent predictors of Internet access; individuals with higher levels of education are almost always on ‘the right side of the digital divide’” (p. 703). With diverse online learning options on the rise, it is necessary to bolster supports to combat the disparate impacts of the digital divide for TWP students--for without appropriate and effective interventions--the digital divide’s persistence will continue to increase digital inequities and thwart access to supports, tools, and resources, threatening high attrition rates and negative educational outcomes.

Digital Inequities and Inaccessible Supports, Tools, and Resources

Research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened digital inequities for TWP students, increasing barriers to supports, tools, and resources. These disparate effects not only widen the digital divide but also deplete social capital, which is the quantity and quality of support people receive in their daily lives (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017). Helsper and van Deursen argue that individuals with low levels of social capital will experience the most online challenges, reducing the likelihood to seek high quality support and increasing the gap between those who do and do not need support. Because TWP students’ social networks have been disrupted from their time in care, their social capital is limited, influencing their capacity to seek digital supports through various sources like family, friends and/or other service providers including, help desks, co-workers, computer experts, and instructors (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017; Rogers, 2016). Due to rising costs of digitized devices, low technological skills, and limited financial resources, mobile cell phone use is on the rise in post-secondary contexts, especially for minoritized

populations like TWP students. Barber et al. (2021) claim that the increased use of mobile phones among marginalized populations is to access the Internet and perform tasks typically done by computers, potentially reducing student participation and engagement in online learning. Increased mobile phone use within educational contexts is concerning, underpinning the disparate impacts of digital inequities and inaccessible tools, supports, and resources experienced by TWP students; however, further study is needed to explore the impacts of cell phones as a substitute for other digital devices among this population in higher education during COVID-19.

To bolster accessibility to programs and supports, many institutions have adopted digitally fillable applications (e.g., Adobe, Microsoft Office). Although convenient for many, these formats remain inaccessible for some, due to high-priced and/or outdated technology, inadequate digital literacy skills, poor connectivity, and limited access to relevant devices (Iloh, 2018). Additionally, the rising costs of high-quality technology force many TWP students to choose used or refurbished laptops that are susceptible to breakdowns and malfunctions, disrupting learning and increasing inequities (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Overlapping with these challenges are the habitual barriers encountered by TWP students, including financial instability, homelessness and housing insecurity, unemployment, poor academic outcomes, and mental health, which are perpetuated—or even worsened—by COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018).

Perpetuation of Socioeconomic and other Disparities

Despite the presence of heterogeneity amongst TWP students, research demonstrates that these students typically experience poorer outcomes in numerous realms including financial instability, homelessness and housing instability, unemployment, academic outcomes, and mental health (Goin Kono & Taylor, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). A study by Barber et al. (2021) found that underrepresented minority students were less likely to have sufficient financial resources to weather the stay-at-home mandate during the early stages of COVID-19, leading to significant differences in food

security and other living necessities. In a report measuring the impact of COVID-19 on post-secondary students across Canada, participants indicated that 68 percent were using up their savings, 54 percent were having to take on more student debt, 51 percent had difficulty paying for their tuition next term, and 51 percent were unable to keep up with their monthly bills (Statistics Canada, 2020). Limited financial resources also influence the types of technology TWP students can access, pushing students to use mobile phones or to find sub-par, used, or refurbished laptops that are susceptible to break downs and malfunctions, which typically do not fulfill the needs of their programs (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Ruff and Linville (2021) emphasize the financial strain and/or stress of COVID-19 on TWP students, which is complicated by minimal familial support and inaccessible resources. Amid the pandemic, TWP students face extreme hardships—especially with housing--placing many in precarious living situations (Ruff & Linville, 2021).

Housing instabilities and risks of homelessness significantly increased over the course of the pandemic, particularly during the recent shift to hybrid and/or online learning models in fall 2021, uprooting many TWP students from their home communities and support systems amid a looming province-wide housing crisis. Studies by Rosenberg and Kim (2017) and Kovarikova (2017) argue the pervasiveness of homelessness amongst youth aging out of care, which negatively impacts student engagement and leads to anxiety, stress, lack of concentration, socioemotional disturbance, and/or academic challenges. Due to numerous placements, trauma, and mental health issues experienced in care, safe and secure housing is hard to obtain for this population (Rosenberg & Kim, 2017; Ruff & Linville, 2021). Adding to the risks of homelessness and unsafe housing situations amid the pandemic, are the perils of job loss, shortened or varied shifts, and low wages.

Kovarikova (2017) claims that this population is more likely to experience unemployment and underemployment at lower wages and employment rates in comparison to parented peers and youth from low-income families. Due to low levels of educational attainment, many TWP students are working

minimum wage jobs, hindering financial independence, and increasing reliance on emergency bursaries and other government assistance programs (Rosenberg & Kim, 2017). The spring 2020 stay-at-home orders and current provincially mandated quarantine measures significantly contribute to the occurrences of unemployment and/or lost work hours, putting many TWP students in unstable living and financial situations (Ruff & Linville, 2021). Statistics Canada (2020) reported that 48 percent of post secondary students lost their jobs or were temporarily laid off, 26 percent had worked reduced hours, 49 percent lost job prospects, and 67 percent had anxiety around future job prospects. As TWP students struggle to find a place over their head, food to eat, and a stable job, it is no surprise that there may be educational setbacks.

Research conveys a correlation between poor academic outcomes and former youth in care (Kovarikova, 2017). Morton (2015) argues that the foster system itself is a profound barrier to the academic achievement of former youth in care and attributes it to a lack of trust with support workers, foster parents, and society. Rios and Rocco (2014) postulate that academic barriers in post-secondary are derived from high school experiences where apathetic teachers and administrators showed little interest in understanding the plights of foster youths and its associated impact on academic outcomes. Other barriers come from the lack of support from social workers throughout their formative years and inadequate management strategies to deal with the mental and emotional issues derived from care (Morton, 2015).

Studies report that foster youth have greater mental health issues than their parented peers (Kovarikova, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic intensifies depression, anxiety, despair, post-traumatic stress symptoms, overwhelming uncertainty, loneliness, and isolation, contributing to negative academic outcomes for TWP students (Kovarikova, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017; Ruff & Linville, 2021). Colacchio Wesley et al. (2020) report that youth from care between 19-30 years of age display post-traumatic stress disorder twice as high as American war veterans, revealing the

potentially damaging effects of remote learning on TWP students, as they may experience disturbing emotions alone with limited access to relevant supports. Statistics Canada (2020) reported increased anxiety in post secondary students around how the pandemic would impact their grades. Rios and Rocco (2014) argue that this “vulnerable and often-marginalized” population (p. 227) have a history of carrying greater burdens than their non-care peers, impairing transitions into, during and/or completion of post-secondary studies (Kauffman, 2015). These burdens are numerous, varied, and unique, significantly impacting the ways in which TWP students interact with and adapt to post-secondary education.

Former Youth in Care Outcomes and the Transition to Post-Secondary

As young as 18 years, TWP students are emancipated from care and thrust into the adult world deprived of preparation and support, including financial and material resources and essential safety nets previously available through government and/or community organizations (Amechi, 2020; Czeck, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017). For many, the transition to adulthood is “abrupt, stark, inflexible, and typically irreversible, [...] without the level of personal, emotional, and financial support that their mainstream counterparts can rely on” (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016, p. 21).

Tuition Waiver Program students enter post-secondary education with a myriad of barriers originated from their time within the foster care system, creating significantly poorer educational outcomes than those from low-income families, first generation learners, and students who identify with a particular race or gender alone (Kovarikova, 2017). Batsche et al. (2014) claim that these negative educational outcomes stem from a variety of factors, including multiple foster placements, frequent school changes, and emotional and behavioural problems derived from trauma, abuse, and/or neglect. Adding to this list of barriers are those associated with Indigenous populations including learning and teaching styles, language and communication modes, cultural patterns, intergenerational residential school trauma, geographic isolation, inaccessibility and/or unavailability to technological devices, and poor internet connectivity (Czeck, 2015). Studies delineate the following outcomes for former youth in

care that impact their desire and/or motivation to pursue higher education: low academic achievement, unemployment or underemployment, homelessness and housing insecurity, criminal justice system involvement, early parenthood, poor physical and mental health, poverty, inadequate transitional supports, lack of support from family and friends, addiction, abuse and trauma, and loneliness (Colacchio Wesley et al, 2020; Czeck, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017).

Considerable research affirms that youth with a history of foster care experience greater challenges once they age out due to the history of individual, relational, and systemic trauma combined with stigma and a lack of adequate resources and access to quality support (Czeck, 2015; Rogers, 2016; Ruff & Linville, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). As such, TWP students navigate the post-secondary system with comparatively different lenses than those from parented homes, often colouring the ways in which they access, and experience post-secondary education (Iloh, 2018).

The Stigma of Care and the Educational Experience

According to Rogers (2016), the term ‘stigma’ originated from the ancient Greeks, and is defined as “a cut or burn, inflicted upon a person, [that] was intended to act as a sign on the body to signify that there was something different or bad about them” (p. 1079-1080). Studies indicate that youth from care experience stigma everyday, greatly influencing the level of personal details shared to others to avoid “adverse social judgement, exclusion, and rejection” (Dansey et al., 2019, p. 36; Rogers, 2016). Stigmas are enduring and impactful because they discourage access to help, devalue experiences in care, reduce empathy and compassion in service providers, and decrease self concept (Gorski, 2010). Villagrana et al. (2018) emphasize the power of assigned labels, especially with TWP students’ concerns around mental health disclosures. One study stresses the damaging impacts of mental illness disclosures on foster youth, arguing that it is one of the most demeaning and socially humiliating of all labels, presenting a strong connection between the powers of stigma and its destructive impacts on former youth in care (Penninck, 2013). The potency of stigmas follows former youth in care everywhere,

poisoning others' perceptions and deeply affecting educational experiences (Villagrana et al., 2018).

Post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to close gaps through creating holistic environments that fulfil the physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs of TWP students.

Closing the Gap

The provision of holistic supports helps address the gaps in higher education that not only boosts positive outcomes but creates opportunities for TWP students to achieve their goals. This blend of hybrid, online, and face-to-face formats have forced learners into new and intimidating post-secondary environments that require technological experience, skill, knowledge, and equipment to attain success. As diverse as online learning can be, so too are its learners, for there is no single path that will work for everyone, especially for TWP students who typically juggle various roles at home and/or work with inadequate working spaces and technological skill and equipment (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Ways to bridge this digital divide could be through the provision of computer application tutorials or webinars that are proven to be highly efficacious in increasing students' digital literacy skills (Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2018). Goin Kono and Taylor (2021) assert the benefits of faculty infusing an ethos of care in online formats through incorporating flexibility, coursework adjustments, and personalization to extend "culturally sustainable practices to all online learning environments in higher education as a way to mitigate equity issues related to the digital divide" (p. 151). To close financial gaps and increase access to higher education, VIU was the first institution to implement a private tuition waiver program that acknowledges barriers faced by students with lived experience in the foster care system (Financial Aid & Awards, n.d.). Although this program alleviates a small portion of the multi-faceted barriers TWP students face, more needs to be done to counter the incessant impacts of COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide.

Implications for Individualized, Wrap-Around, and Relationship-Based Approaches

“Educational resiliency, defined as the heightened likelihood of school success despite adverse environment conditions, is enhanced by [...] school relationships” (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016, p. 31). Relationship-based approaches are most effective when used in conjunction with wrap-around practices that model consistency and dependability (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020). For instance, strategies like tracking and supporting attendance and regular check-ins build trust and demonstrate consistency for a population with a history of chaotic instability (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). These approaches are important for school engagement, as relationships with caregivers, teachers, social workers, and school officials are highly valued because they are sources of encouragement and acknowledgement for successful academic outcomes (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Other strategies that build trust, resilience, and optimism include asset building programs, trauma-informed approaches, and transitional supports.

Individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based approaches are enriched through asset building programs, which help TWP students build financial and social capital through developing optimal characteristics like academic resilience and financial literacy skills (Nadon, 2020). Nadon outlines various strategies for asset building, including a needs assessment, a provision of basic needs support and safety net connections, and fostering resilience, which all serve to increase social and financial capital and mitigate adversity. Another approach to implement in conjunction with asset building programs are trauma informed approaches, which help promote environments of healing and recovery.

Recent research on trauma and former youth in care in higher education is sparse; however, there are many studies that substantiate the complex trauma experienced by alumni from care (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Kovarikova, 2017; Nadon, 2020; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Hickie (2020) explains that trauma informed approaches are rooted in an understanding of trauma and its impact on other people’s lives, allowing for trauma survivors to recover a sense of control and autonomy, ensuring

efforts are made to avoid re-traumatization by safeguarding environments, and acknowledging the impact of trauma, history, culture, and gender. Trauma can also impact how TWP students access assistance. Colacchio Wesley et al. (2020) refer to this type of trauma response as ‘survivalist self-reliance’--a heightened sense of self-reliance caused by a history of unavailable adults--making it difficult to access help and trust or rely on others. Studies indicate that proactive helping strategies (e.g., check-ins) significantly impact the lives of youth from care because they are purposeful and authentic, creating approachable and unbiased ways for TWP students to access help and cultivate trusting relationships (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020). However, to establish purposeful and authentic wrap-around supports, we must not forget about the benefits of transitional supports.

Studies indicate that former youth in care typically experience dismal outcomes as they transition to higher education, giving reasons for implementing transitional supports that focus on academics, campus connectedness, mental health, social engagement, and independent living skills to promote successful transitions (Czeck, 2015). As such, post-secondary institutions need to be aware of the different needs and life situations of underrepresented learners and adapt their programs for these student groups (Carlsen et al., 2016). However, due to limited research in this area, future investigation is needed on the benefits of transitional supports for TWP students in higher education.

Summary

The massive shift to online learning has created an opportunity to study the impacts of ‘popularized’ online formats often known as accessible, flexible, optimal, and innovative (Iloh, 2018). However, studies indicate that online learning is not all positive, citing various limitations (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Underpinning these challenges are the persistent barriers of homelessness, financial insecurity, and mental health issues, which disrupt and/or arrest educational pursuits (Kauffman, 2015). As post-secondary institutions return to a new ‘normal,’ in the wake of trauma, stigma, stress, and loss, schools need to redefine ways to be more inclusive, responsive, and purposeful in fulfilling TWP student needs

and supporting well-being (Giboney Wall, 2021). Studies already conducted suggest some strategies and programs that assist TWP students engaging in online formats, revealing the importance of individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports that increase resilience and academic success (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Czeck, 2015, Nadon, 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

Moving forward, more research is needed on the effects of COVID-19 in relation to digital adoption, zoom fatigue, the digital divide, and the deficit perspective within the context of higher education. Tuition Waiver Program students are an extremely diverse, unique, and largely underrepresented group, highlighting the importance in generating a greater awareness around their diverse needs and experiences to reduce barriers and increase holistic supports and services that will contribute to meaningful and fulfilling post-secondary educational experiences.

Tuition Waiver Program students are bombarded with insurmountable barriers to which the literature review demonstrates, making post-secondary education intimidating and out of reach for many--despite institutional attempts to increase access and mitigate barriers. The next chapter incorporates my own experiences, providing context to the never-ending typical and novel educational barriers experienced by TWP students, giving even more reason to incorporate individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based approaches in higher education.

Chapter Three: Application

The application chapter provides an overview of my own experiences working with TWP students in relation to COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide. The first section gives context to the supports I provide within an open-access institution (Vancouver Island University, n.d.) and how these supports help counter the negative impacts of COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide. These genuine and personal experiences attest to the devastating impacts of digital adoption and COVID-19, revealing a widening digital divide and its disruptive impacts on digital inequities and inaccessible supports, tools, and resources, intensifying an already complicated educational experience. The second section presents ways to instigate and inspire change when supporting TWP students, illustrating the power of kindness and its long-lasting effects. Even in the presence of my committed and purposeful supports, the COVID-19 pandemic proves all-consuming and wearisome, demonstrating a substantial need to do more for this incredibly resilient and awe-inspiring population that continues to pursue their educational goals, even when all the stacks are against them.

Personal Experiences with Supporting Tuition Waiver Program Students

My personal accounts are derived from my role as the Financial Aid Access Specialist at VIU, where I provide support for former youth in care accessing the TWP. The TWP waives tuition fees for eligible students with lived experience in the BC foster care system up to, and including, one's first undergraduate degree (Financial Aid & Awards, n.d.). This program was initially implemented to help alleviate the financial burdens typically faced by TWP students accessing post-secondary education; however, increasing education, technology, and living costs make educational goals even harder to attain, clearly conveying that these barriers are not only here to stay but are increasing at an alarming rate.

On top of the typical burdens (Czeck, 2015; Kovarikova 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016), are those created or worsened by COVID-19 and digital adoption (Amechi, 2020; Doreleyers & Knighton, 2020;

Fontaine, 2017; Iloh, 2018; Ruff & Linville, 2021; Wiederhold, 2020). Pre-pandemic, TWP students were already struggling with a complicated post-secondary system derived from deeply rooted stigmas, mental health issues, and meagre supports from family and friends (Czeck, 2015; Rogers, 2016; Ruff & Linville, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). These support deficits do very little for TWP students' social capital (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017), often rendering these students helpless and hopeless as they embark on one of the most intimidating and impactful experiences of their lives.

Tuition Waiver Program students age out of care only to enter another domain of uncertainty that unfortunately perpetuates the traumatic experiences from which they came (Barber et al., 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2020). Exacerbating experiences even more are the multiple roles TWP students simultaneously juggle while attempting to fulfill numerous educational demands (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Many TWP students are single parents, trying their best to work, learn, and adequately provide for their children, which can be particularly challenging when faced with threats of job loss, food insecurity, and homelessness (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Kovarikova, 2017). Whether single or not, these incessant burdens are arduous and inescapable, illuminating the frustrating and disempowering struggles encountered by disenfranchised groups in higher education (Goin Kono & Taylor, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

The Perpetual Cycle of Adversity

Tuition Waiver Program students often enter the post-secondary realm with little to no financial resources and zero support from family, friends, and support workers, making post-secondary education difficult to attain right from the beginning (Batsche et al., 2014; Kovarikova, 2017; Tamarack Institute, 2021). To counter these financial disparities, there are various financial aid supports available to assist TWP students experiencing financial hardship, including TWP-specific emergency bursaries, internal scholarships and awards, and government student loans and grants. Tuition Waiver Program emergency bursaries are reserved for students who can demonstrate successful progression in their programs;

however, these expectations are difficult to attain due to a history of poor academic outcomes and various other factors (Kovarikova, 2017). Adding to these criteria, is a general expectation that distressed students must instigate their own requests for support to get the help that they need. Based on my experiences supporting TWP students in distressed states, reaching out depends on the intensity of one's emotional and/or mental well-being for some are just far too deep in their despair to think clearly and/or proactively to ask for assistance or recognize that they need help. Some can take months—or even years-- of struggling with depression, anxiety, academic issues, or financial woes before finding the courage to seek help, giving even more reason to incorporate consistent check-ins to prevent students from falling into these precarious states. Complicating the help process even more are the restricted amounts of emergency bursary funds per student, which do not reflect inflated costs of living, technology, and education, forcing many TWP emergency bursary recipients to choose between basic needs and technological demands. Such dilemmas not only widen digital gaps but position TWP students on the wrong side of the digital divide and even further behind than their non-parented peers (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019).

Other financial supports include the online VIU Scholarship, Award, and Bursary Profile, which provides financial assistance, incentives, and rewards to eligible students to help pay down educational costs (Financial Aid & Awards, n.d.-a). If completed within the yearly deadlines, students are considered for a variety of internal awards, bursaries, and scholarships. Regardless of this perceived financial benefit, there appears to be a palpable gap between those who apply and those who do not (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017). Despite my attempts to support TWP students in accessing the profile, the outcome of TWP applicants is low, which I believe is contributed by the following issues: insufficient time, study space, and digital skills, limited internet access, inappropriate digital devices, and the daily burdens of life (Amechi, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Czeck, 2015; Kauffman, 2015). There is also an established expectation that attaches proof of high financial need to one's commitment and determination to

explore and/or apply for all financial options—*if they are in high need, why didn't they apply? If they need the money, then they should be looking for all financial options*. However, this expectation is unrealistic and untrue as reasons for those who demonstrate an assumed low motivation or disinterest in applying for financial options are often consumed with the daily pressures of *surviving*. On top of trying to survive are other barriers that deter TWP students from researching and/or accessing available resources like digital inequities and inaccessible supports, tools, and resources. As a person of privilege, it is easy to look through an 'entitled lens' to find fault with those outside of my dominant realm; however, removing these biased perspectives helps me to create space for understanding and compassion. In doing this, I have come to understand that these financial options are wonderful but add to the insurmountable burdens already encountered by TWP students because of the numerous 'hoops' to jump through.

Government student loans and grants are particularly complex, time consuming, and digitally challenging, making this process anything but easy for those already struggling with the daily burdens of life and school. These processes are even more challenging for those with permanent disabilities for the digital and administrative requirements are difficult to manage, comprehend, and navigate, requiring significant time and effort to access these much-needed funds to afford indispensable—but highly priced--supports like assistive technology, laptops, tutors, and various other resources. Some TWP students with permanent disabilities find the student loan process too complicated to access, choosing to forgo the financial benefits (e.g., non-repayable grants) despite the negative impact it may have on their academic outcomes. Such circumstances represent the relentless cycle of adversity often encountered by TWP students in the post-secondary sector.

Government student loan processes add to this perpetual cycle of adversity, deterring many TWP students from applying as it not only incites debt anxiety but requires a good handle in budgeting, organization, communication, and digital skills. Some have applied—only to give up halfway-- because of

the overwhelming burden of administrative paperwork, restrictive identification requirements, complicated application steps, insufficient digital skills, and lack of available digital devices (Fontaine, 2017). Furthermore, the government student loan system carries a universal assumption that all students have access to a mobile device and are digitally competent; however, this is not always true for underserved populations who typically share and/or borrow devices and have varied technical abilities (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Camillo & Longo, 2020; Carlsen et al., 2016). As such, TWP students often give up on these 'beneficial' funding options not for lack of trying but from a lack of accessible resources to *keep* trying (Morton, 2015).

Due to mounting expenses in various realms (e.g., education, living, technology), TWP students sometimes forgo obtaining a laptop in favor of using their cell phone to save money (Barber et al., 2021). Unfortunately, there are limited resources currently available to address the prevalent use of mobile phones in higher education; however, the VIU library provides loaner laptops, given that students have the capacity to reach out and the patience to endure long wait times and disappointing outcomes (e.g., no stock). Other options include community agencies that provide free or cheap refurbished laptops on a referral basis to low-income students, which often present extensive wait times, limited stock, and the eventual occurrence of breakdowns and/or malfunctions (Fontaine, 2017; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Adding to these disparities are the varied and inconsistent ranges of technical skills, which complicate access to various programs for high need students.

The early months of the pandemic necessitated a move to PDF digitally fillable documents for all VIU internal applications and emergency bursaries. However, the digital challenges this format presented for many students with limited digital literacy skills, digital devices, and programs prompted a conversion to web forms, which has significantly increased access, usability, and efficiency. Unfortunately, many government programs continue to use PDF digitally fillable documents, which have proven to be burdensome, complex, and time consuming, often leading to unwarranted outcomes. COVID-19 and

digital adoption have had a significant impact on the way in which we access information, study, and interact with people across the world. The rapid shift to online learning not only created access issues to funding programs but also shifted many to use various digital communication platforms.

The increasing popularity and excessive use of digital communication platforms has instigated a phenomenon, known as ‘zoom fatigue,’ which compels many students to disengage from technology because of fatigue and impaired well-being (Wiederhold, 2020). Many TWP students have disconnected from all technology to alleviate the impacts of ‘zoom fatigue,’ which directly affects their educational experience as it impedes access to education-related information and creates misunderstandings, delayed responses, and institutional neglect. Although digital adoption presents various limitations, this format is not all bad.

Aside from the safe alternative ways to connect and access information, online learning is convenient, affordable, flexible and offers the ability for students to study within their home communities (Carlsen et al., 2016; Iloh, 2018; Kauffman, 2015). However, these benefits are outweighed by the pandemic’s persistence, demonstrating the ways in which online learning can be a perpetuate cycle of adversity, especially in the context of accessing essential supports from afar (Barber et al., 2021; Camillo & Longo, 2020).

Remote and Hybrid Post-Secondary Supports

The early months of the pandemic lead to subsequent breakdowns in TWP students’ healthy routines and educational patterns, which not only placed many in precarious positions but posed challenges for TWP students to access help. The rapid shift to remote working conditions, instigated a change in my own approaches as access to my supports were limited to email, Zoom, and/or Facebook messenger. During these first few months, many TWP students were in distress due to job loss, financial uncertainty, homelessness, illness, mental health issues, childcare/eldercare, and/or food insecurity (Bozkurt et al., 2020), which mirrored many of their experiences in care (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

As such, necessitating an implementation of individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports to foster resilience and belonging, while building on social and financial capital to reduce hardship (Nadon, 2020). In doing this, my remote relationships with each TWP student grew stronger and much more purposeful and individual. Many were pleasantly surprised—if not relieved—to find someone who cared about them and their educational goals. These personal check-ins not only bolstered students' trust in an overwhelming and intimidating system but normalized vulnerability. As such, these supports have evolved to monthly check-ins (e.g., email, text, social media) and mid-semester phone calls, which reinforce my relationships with TWP students and help generate an awareness of available supports and resources (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Although it takes time, patience, and consistency, these efforts are instrumental in breaking down barriers of trust, stigma, and system-related fears, generating approachable ways for TWP students to seek help without shame or judgment (Morton, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Another effective and meaningful way to incorporate holistic approaches in higher education are through meaningful acts of recognition.

Recognizing the efforts and successes of others is transformative, as it inspires confidence, resilience, perseverance, and hope. The ways in which I recognize TWP students' efforts and successes is through a VIU-endorsed Tuition Waiver gift box program, which delivers one free gift box filled with local Vancouver Island products directly to students' homes each semester. These individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based approaches instill joy, optimism, and hope that significantly benefit TWP students' overall educational experiences and mental well-being, especially for a population with a high prevalence of mental health issues (Kovarikova, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017).

Trauma and Stigma

Due to traumatic experiences in care, many TWP students enter post-secondary with aspirations to 'fix' the broken care system from which they came, resulting in a desire to pursue 'helping' programs,

like Human Services, Child and Youth Care, and Social Work. Unfortunately, these programs can be triggering for some TWP students, potentially leading to experiences of vicarious traumatization and re-traumatization (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020). Addressing these issues require an awareness of these triggers along with a plan to manage such emotional setbacks, especially when in remote settings. One way to provide support is by helping TWP students come up with a ‘mental health maintenance plan,’ which could be a combination of self-care practices and mental health care professionals. Adding to the triggering threats of course content and the daily stress of educational life is the persistence of stigmas in higher education (Gorski, 2010; Kovarikova, 2017; Rogers, 2016).

Many school officials within positions of power tend to hold this population to the same expectations as their parented peers. Whether unconscious or conscious, these unrealistic, entitled, and ignorant assumptions can be detrimental to TWP students’ wellbeing, warranting a need for those responsible to reflect upon their own damaging actions to hopefully generate a sense of empathy, compassion, and awareness for those with lived experiences in care. These persistently harmful attitudes not only negatively affect TWP students’ emotional, mental, and physical health but deter many from accessing help for fear of rejection, exposure, or humiliation (Dansey et al., 2019; Gorski, 2010). Tuition Waiver Program students have taken months—sometimes years—to disclose information related to their time in care, mental health, addiction, or abuse (Villagrana et al., 2018). These damaging and pandemic-heightened stigmas not only counter access to the TWP and other TWP-specific funding options but perpetuate socioeconomic and other disparities (Barber et al., 2021; Goin Kono & Taylor, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

Employment and financial issues create various challenges for TWP students, which tend to ooze into many other facets of their lives including housing, academics, and mental health (Barber et al., 2021; Goin Kono & Taylor, 2021; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017; Ruff & Linville, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2020). For instance, the blend of online, hybrid, and face-to-face formats have forced many TWP students to leave

their home communities in search of housing in closer proximity to VIU amid a province-wide housing crisis. Unstable employment and finances exacerbate these housing insecurities as many TWP students are unable to secure housing placements because they cannot prove stable employment, cover up-front costs, and/or afford the high rental rates.

The stigma of care exacerbates the housing crisis because it reinforces discriminating practices against those with lived care experiences. Such circumstances render some TWP students to live in precarious conditions like tents, decrepit trailers, cramped spaces, abusive households, and/or temporary units, placing many at risk of falling behind or not completing their courses (Ruff & Linville, 2021). These uncertainties negatively impact the academic experience, leading to arbitrary attendances, academic concerns, withdrawals, dropouts, and/or physical/mental health leaves. When in these states of panic, many of us wonder why these students do not reach out for help; however, the real reason is that many find reaching out more of a hindrance than a benefit.

Asking for Help: A Hindrance or Benefit?

For those who have the capacity to reach out, there are various ‘hoops’ to get through, including but not limited to age, income, grade point average (GPA), and/or foster care designation. These ‘hoops’ often require TWP students to prove their need, rendering some ashamed or embarrassed as reaching out requires a significant amount of trust, humility, vulnerability, and courage. Pre-pandemic, most TWP students were expected to access help in-person; however, I find this option to be demeaning and emotionally triggering from some. The pandemic’s shift to online services generated more flexibility and communication options for such requests, which not only created a ‘safe barrier’ to ask for help but gave TWP students agency to reach out in ways that made them feel safe and comfortable. These remote services are further enhanced by VIU’s recent endorsement of hybrid work schedules, which promote an adaptable service of support that provides TWP students with a variety of options to connect with me while upholding their need to feel safe, secure, and in control of their environment.

Another common deterrent in help requests is with the administrative burden of paperwork and long processing times. Although asking for help carries many benefits, post-secondary institutions and government agencies need to make their support practices and processes less administrative and more approachable and accessible; otherwise, we will continue to see many TWP students forgo their educational dreams to avoid the burdens of asking for help.

Reinforcing the poverty trap and negative aspects of reaching out are the restrictive policies and practices of various government programs that threaten financial supports upon which many TWP students rely on. For instance, government funding (e.g., income assistance) is drastically reduced and/or cut-off for those who plan to take full- or part-time course loads, forcing many TWP students to choose between their education and survival (Czeck, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017). Some government funding programs limit TWP students to a selection of short-term certificate programs that often do little in improving job prospects (e.g., low-wage professions) and may or may not be conducive to their interests. Adding to TWP students' financial barriers are the costs of textbooks, school supplies, and living expenses as the TWP only covers tuition fees. Additionally, the TWP collaborates with other youth in care funding programs to help offset educational costs, providing students meet the restrictive criteria such as age, time in care, and care designations. Other options include student loans, grants, scholarships, and awards; however, these options are not always ideal for TWP students due to the various issues previously mentioned, giving even more reason for my extensive efforts in supporting this amazingly resilient and determined population.

Transitional Supports

The holistic supports I strive to provide not only incorporate an understanding of trauma (Hickle, 2020) and the stigma of care (Gorski, 2010) but serve to inform transitional supports for incoming and outgoing TWP students. The benefits of post-secondary transitional supports for TWP students require more research; however, my own practices and work experiences confirm that TWP students need

support in the following areas: academic supports, campus connectedness, mental health supports, social supports, and independent living skills (Czeck, 2015). These themes can be integrated through transitional workshops and other supports to successfully transition first-time and continuing TWP students into university culture and onto ‘the right side’ of the digital divide (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017).

Just as incoming TWP students need a positive start, the same goes for those leaving the institutional sphere. Unfortunately, TWP students’ outgoing transitions are often like their transitions from care— isolating, alone, anxiety-inducing, and overwhelming—necessitating a change in the way post-secondary institutions send-off these students. Outgoing TWP students need to be acknowledged and celebrated for not only overcoming these massive hurdles but finally achieving their educational goals. To recognize and celebrate these successes, I offer TWP graduates the option to sign up for a VIU-supported graduate-themed gift box, which many find extremely positive and uplifting as they transition back into the work world. Another way to successfully transition TWP graduates is through supports that focus on cover letter and resume writing, interview skills, employment and careers goals, financial literacy, community supports, food and housing, and optional financial bursaries to help cover ‘transitional costs’ like certifications, licenses, uniforms, business attire, and/or damage deposits. These individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports instil a sense of purpose, optimism, and belonging for TWP students from beginning to end, while giving them the confidence and efficacy needed to leave the institutional realm and make their own way into the world.

Creating Positive Change through Meaningful “Lollipop” Connections

“We need to redefine leadership as being about lollipop moments, how many we create, how many that we acknowledge, how many of them we pay forward, and how many we say thank you for” (Dudley, 2010). I often think about leadership as something beyond myself, blinding me from noticing the meaningful things I do for others or that others do for me. I believe leadership can be demonstrated

through unconditional acts of kindness, which remove expectation and/or obligation from the giving equation. Lollipop moments are humble and flexible acts of consideration, given freely either through one's time, knowledge, expertise, and/or compassion. One of my lollipop moments is the gift boxes I provide to TWP students, which are given without expectation of GPA, income, age, family size, or geographical location. These small human acts of kindness bring streams of light into one's darkness, emphasizing my own inner power of positivity and optimism, revealing how I can use it to better the lives of those less fortunate. Whether it is in changing one's understanding around their capabilities, their capacity to make change, or their ability to succeed, I am demonstrating how one's world can significantly change just through one—or many--impactful lollipop moments (Dudley, 2010).

Summary

My experiences working with TWP students demonstrate the existence of these insurmountable barriers, which seem to increase as the pandemic ensues (Amechi, 2020; Barber et al., 2021). To mitigate these incessant burdens, public institutions need to be much more persistent in their strategies to eradicate barriers and instigate positive and impactful change, especially for those typically underserved in higher education (Giboney Wall, 2021; Kovarikova, 2017). These relentless barriers place TWP students in precarious balances between education and life; therefore, we need to look beyond the educational scope to assist in areas that may be new and unfamiliar to us. In doing this, we acknowledge that the educational experience is impacted by numerous facets of one's life, giving reason to reassess educational inequities and inaccessible supports, resources, and tools that continue to increase barriers to education in a pandemic and digitally dominated world (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Carlsen et al., 2016). Instigating positive change recognizes the needs of this diverse, unique, and underserved group, while giving TWP students a system upon which they can rely on and believe in. As such, enhancing a sense of normalcy, purpose, and belonging while TWP students embark on one of the most memorable and impactful experiences of their lives.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

This concluding chapter connects my argument to the research and my personal experiences in my supportive role as Financial Aid Access Specialist at VIU. The first section elucidates the inspiration behind my paper, linking my M.Ed. experiences to my ideas. The second section connects reason with evidence as discussed in the literature review and the last section encapsulates the ways in which my argument plays out in a practical context, demonstrating how my argument can lead to impactful and long-lasting change for TWP students within higher education.

My M.Ed. Learning Journey

The concept of my paper is attributed to my graduate learning experiences, which have provided me with the opportunity to self-reflect, explore, and consider how my identity, power, and privilege intersect with those different than myself. This accumulation of knowledge and wisdom has challenged personal assumptions, shifted perspectives, and deepened an understanding around the plights of TWP students within the context of post-secondary education, permanently altering the ways in which I regard and interact with TWP students throughout their educational journeys.

This learning journey examined the impacts of trauma, stigma, diversity constructs, privilege, and poverty cycles, which was—and continues to be-- supplemented by the genuine experiences of youth from care as they attempt to traverse the unsteady terrain of the post-secondary landscape, completely alone and without support. The ideas in this paper are inspired by my quest to examine TWP students' educational barriers to post-secondary education, particularly amid COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide. The glaring reality of the pandemic within a digitally dominant world illuminates the unearned advantages I hold in society, which has allowed me to walk freely and unscathed through the tumultuousness of housing insecurities, food instabilities, unemployment, and poverty. This profound awareness inspired my search to find better supports for TWP students to minimize barriers and increase access and equity in higher education.

Underpinning this paper is that of my educational philosophy, which embraces change, opportunity, and enfranchisement, giving way to a variety of freedoms in multiple realms, including employment, finances, relationships, and mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. This philosophy reinforces my desire to create safe, inclusive, positive, and stigma-free spaces for TWP students seeking to end the vicious cycles of poverty, trauma, addiction, and abuse derived from a dysfunctional system of care.

As a post-graduate student, I have had the honor to put into practice all that I have learned to enrich my role as advocate, advisor, and support worker through the provision of individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports to foster resilience, hope, and optimal learning outcomes. This enlightening journey has provided me with the gift of insight and prudence as I continue my purposeful quest in transforming TWP students' post-secondary experiences through instigating small—but meaningful— 'lollipop moments' (Dudley, 2010).

Summary

Each of the preceding chapters identify the significant impacts of trauma, addiction, abuse, and stigma in conjunction with COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide, inferring that the rapid shift to online learning greatly influences TWP students' well-being and overall academic experiences. Strategies to combat these adverse effects were identified, supporting the provision of individualized, wrap-around, relationship-based approaches to reduce negative outcomes and foster optimism, resilience, and success. The three chapters connect to my argument and each other, linking context with reason and theory by providing real-world examples that not only reveal the devastating impacts of these incessant burdens but convey the benefits of holistic supports to help break adversity cycles and mitigate barriers to access and equity in higher education.

In this paper, I claim that TWP students are placed even further behind in their post-secondary achievements because of a pandemic-induced shift to digital adoption, which has widened the digital divide, increased digital inequities, and complicated access to relevant tools, resources, and supports.

These disparate impacts not only increase educational gaps within an already complicated educational system but perpetuate—or even worsen—socioeconomic disparities, rendering many TWP students on the precipice of academic failure (Czeck, 2015; Helsper & van Deursen, 2017; Kauffman, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Research on the impacts of COVID-19, digital adoption, and the digital divide on TWP students in higher education is sparse; however, studies attest to the overwhelming burdens these students carry in many realms, conveying reasons behind their current and exhausting struggles as they attempt to achieve their educational goals within a system rife with stigma and restrictive processes (Barber et al., 2021; Batsche et al., 2014; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Czeck, 2015; Fontaine, 2017; Kovarikova, 2017; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Ruff & Linville, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). These insurmountable hardships confine TWP students to a relentless cycle of hardship void of hope and self-worth, warranting a real need for post-secondary institutions and government ministries to reassess their current practices, particularly with the challenges of digital adoption, digital divide, restrictive processes, and negative stereotypes (Amechi, 2020; Carlsen et al., 2016; Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Gorski, 2010; Morton, 2015; Nadon, 2020; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Villagrana et al., 2018).

Despite the limitations of remote learning, this format presents beneficial ways for TWP students to connect with others and engage in their courses within the safety of their own homes (Carlsen et al., 2016; Iloh, 2018; Kauffman, 2015). Yet, current conditions of the pandemic and mounting hardships faced by TWP students is a growing concern, indicating that there is still much more to learn and much more to do. Studies suggest some strategies and programs that assist TWP students, revealing the importance of individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based supports to increase resilience, optimism, and academic success (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Giboney Wall, 2021; Hickie, 2020; Nadon, 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

Looking ahead to the future, more research is needed on the effects of COVID-19, digital adoption, the digital divide, Zoom Fatigue, and the benefits of transitional supports for TWP students within the

context of higher education. Tuition Waiver Program students are typically underserved in post-secondary realms, making it essential to prioritize their needs and experiences to mitigate adversities and support their quest for academic success.

Implications

Through a combination of research and personal experiences, this paper gives voice to the unique and diverse needs of former youth in care accessing the TWP at VIU. If anything, these genuine experiences add context to the research, conveying the expansive plights this population must overcome to access the basic human right of education within the context of the pandemic, digital adoption, and digital divide. This paper illustrates the patronizing and incessant ‘hoops’ these students typically jump through to access crucial supports, demonstrating how these burdens not only plague TWP students’ academic experiences but feed into a never-ending cycle of digital inequities, inaccessible supports, tools, and resources, stigma, trauma, and poverty (Colacchio Wesley et al., 2020; Dansey et al., 2019; Gorski, 2010, Villagrana et al., 2018).

This paper serves to generate a greater awareness around these challenges to shift negative perspectives and encourage post-secondary institutions and government ministries to reassess funding criteria, policies, and digital processes that tend to perpetuate the cycle of adversity that almost always leads to poor academic and life outcomes. This paper also aims to instigate meaningful and positive change to increase post-secondary access, equity, and awareness, while shifting the ways in which TWP students are regarded and treated throughout their educational journeys (Dudley, 2010).

Lastly, this paper intends to support the larger research community in developing a greater understanding of TWP students’ learning needs, associated barriers, and the benefits of individualized, wrap-around, and relationship-based approaches amid a pandemic and digitally dominated world; thus, broadening research opportunities that focus on access, equity, and support practices for TWP students within the post-secondary context.

Various studies confirm the innumerable burdens former youth in care encounter as they age out of care because of stigma, insufficient supports, low social capital, and a history of individual, relational, and systemic trauma that tend to permeate into various realms and reap undesirable outcomes (Czeck, 2015; Rogers, 2016; Ruff & Linville, 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). The gaping digital divide and the effects of the pandemic and digital adoption do little to lift this population out of a relentless cycle of adversity, affirming a need for post-secondary institutions to prioritize the needs of this amazingly resilient population to not only break vicious cycles but create an approachable and bias-free system upon which TWP students can rely on and believe in throughout their educational journeys—from start to finish.

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