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## TRACKING COLLEGE-TO-CAREER PATHWAYS FOR ILLINOIS FOSTER YOUTH

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## Executive Summary

In 2018, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (known as Perkins V) was enacted to develop and enhance career pathway programs that increase academic and technical skills among disadvantaged populations (Granovskiy, 2018; P.L. 115-224). Under Perkins V, the special populations category was expanded to include youth with a parent on active duty in the Armed Forces, homeless individuals, and foster youth (or individuals with experience in foster care). Increasing accessibility to career and technical education (CTE) programs among disadvantaged groups, such as former foster youth, can potentially lead to promising careers and economic stability. However, foster youth often encounter numerous barriers that impede their academic and career success (Feight et al., 2016; Fryar et al., 2017; Johnson, 2021).

Research shows that youth with foster care experience are less likely to graduate from high school (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Further, while many aspire to attend college, very few are likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution, and even fewer are likely to earn a college degree (Dworsky, 2018; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Johnson, 2021; Wolanin, 2005). Consequently, foster youth are more susceptible to housing insecurity, limited financial support, unstable employment, dependency on government assistance, and incarceration (Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2007; Feight et al., 2016; Fryar et al., 2017; Johnson, 2021; Wolanin, 2005).

## The Problem

In Illinois, there are more than 21,000 children and youth in foster care. Approximately 26% of these individuals are 13 and older (Illinois Department of Children & Family Services [IDCFS] 2021). Although CTE programs are offered at both secondary and postsecondary educational levels, little to no data about current and former foster youths' CTE program matriculation and attainment is available. Considering that foster youth are identified as a disadvantaged population under Perkins V, it is imperative to address the need for: 1) an increased awareness of and access to CTE programs among foster youth; and 2) systematic tracking of Illinois foster youths' enrollment, retention, and graduation from CTE programs at the postsecondary educational level.

## The Solution

To fully evaluate the impact of postsecondary CTE programs on current and former foster youths' educational and career outcomes, state leaders in Illinois and CTE program administrators must develop and implement an efficient tracking system that recognizes foster youth as a student demographic within CTE programs, as well as records pertinent information relative to foster youths' matriculation, persistence, skill development, and job outcomes.

This brief highlights two sections within the Perkins V Act: Section 7, Definitions, which recognizes current and former foster youth as a special population; and Section 112, Accountability, which provides an overview of the state and local reporting requirements relative to CTE program outcomes for identified special populations. This brief then

provides recommendations to improve statewide tracking of foster youths' postsecondary educational attempts and attainment in Illinois CTE programs.

## Overview of Career and Technical Education

The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-270), herein after "Perkins IV," was enacted to promote the development of academic, career, and technical skills among students who elect to matriculate in career and technical education programs, specifically ones that prepare learners for high-skill, high-wage, or high-demand careers (P.L. 109-270). In 2018, Perkins IV was reauthorized and revised through the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act of 2018 (Granovskiy, 2018; P.L. 115-224). Effective July 1, 2019, states received federal funds to develop and implement CTE programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels. CTE programs provide individuals with practical knowledge and occupational skills for competitive careers beyond high school (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020). In addition, CTE students can select from 16 different career clusters that include health science and information technology, as well as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). CTE programs generally require a short-term commitment of two years or less for postsecondary education and training. With more than 75 vocational pathways, CTE students have the opportunity to earn a certificate or an associate's degree in high-demand fields that can potentially yield substantial earnings (Association for Career and Technical Education [ACTE], 2020).

## CTE Special Populations: Foster Youth

According to Perkins IV, CTE programs were designed to create and strengthen career pathways specifically for marginalized populations, which includes individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, individuals who are disabled, single parents, English-learning adults, and foster children (Granovskiy, 2018; P.L. 115-224). Under the Perkins V reauthorization, special populations were expanded to include youth whose parents are actively serving in the Armed Forces and homeless individuals. Additionally, the special population categorized as foster children was redefined to include both current and former foster youth (Granovskiy, 2018; P.L. 115-224). This creates an opportunity for individuals who have exited the foster care system to earn CTE credentials and help bridge the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Nationwide, more than 20,000 youth between the ages of 18 to 21 transition or "age out" of the foster care system into adulthood each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Once emancipated from the system, foster youth must assume responsibility for their care, often without adequate emotional, familial, and financial support (Amechi, 2016; Hallett & Westland, 2015). Since foster youth are likely to remain in the system for an extended period of time (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020), they are often deficient in independent living skills that are essential for the successful transition into adulthood (Allen & Williams, 2012; Courtney, Lee et al., 2011; Okpych, 2015). Thus, the Perkins V recognition of foster youth as a special population for CTE programs can help provide



the academic and vocational training to secure and sustain high-wage careers for adults.

## Benefits and Barriers to CTE Among Foster Youth

CTE programs are a viable pathway for foster youth to gain essential academic and vocational skills to increase employability and economic self-sufficiency. Studies show that educational attainment and skill development are equated to higher earnings. National data on employment rates and earnings relative to education attainment show that full-time workers who are 25 or over and have a bachelor's or associate's degree earn, on average, a weekly wage of \$1248 or \$887, respectively (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Carnevale et al. (2020) highlighted the value of pursuing a career-specific education relative to the short time commitment required to complete the program of study. Due to their high skill levels and the high-demand training, CTE certificate and associate's degree holders can quickly transition from college to a career and earn significantly more

than individuals with bachelor's degrees (Carnevale et al., 2020).

Since degree attainment can positively impact the life trajectories of individuals, increasing CTE program accessibility among disadvantaged populations such as foster youth is necessary. However, it is important to note that accessibility does not equal education attainment. Foster youth are often faced with a myriad of barriers that impede their postsecondary attainment (Amechi, 2016; Dworsky & Perez, 2010) and hinder their employability and economic mobility. For example, foster youth are often academically disadvantaged by disruptions in their education due to placement instability and frequent school changes (Davis, 2006). Though many foster youth aspire to earn a college degree, the gaps in their education leave them unprepared for college (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Peters et al., 2009; Wolanin, 2005). Equally important, foster youth often lack essential skills such as time management, study techniques, and organizational skills (Hallett & Westland, 2015; Piel, 2018), which are essential to completing high-quality CTE

programs. Of those who matriculate to a postsecondary institution, many will likely fall short of the CTE program entrance requirements and will need developmental courses at the start of their college career (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hallett & Westland, 2015), which can delay their progress toward degree completion.

Non-academic barriers are equally detrimental to foster youths' academic and vocational training through CTE programs. Given their experience with trauma, abuse, and neglect, foster youth are more susceptible to mental and emotional disorders (McMillen et al., 2005; Hallett & Westland, 2015; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Since postsecondary CTE programs are generally offered at community colleges where campus housing is not readily available, foster youth are likely to struggle with housing stability, as studies indicate that between 11% and 36% of this population will become homeless within the first year after transiting from state care (Fowler, et al., 2009; Fryar et al., 2017).

Moreover, foster youth are often unaware of postsecondary pathways as well as CTE program opportunities (Davis, 2006). Research suggests that foster parents and case workers may not promote college-going behaviors due to a perception that foster youth are not college material or they are uninformed about college pathways and the application process (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Unlike their non-foster peers, foster youth often lack familial and other adult supports that can help advise and strategize steps to achieve

college and career goals (Emerson, 2006; Hallett & Westland, 2015; Wolanin, 2005).

Indeed, there is no single solution that will address the needs of foster youth. However, the Perkins V recognition of these individuals as a special population may be an essential factor in potentially improving their lives and career outcomes. While increasing foster youths' CTE program access can create pathways to stable employment and earning gains, ensuring their academic and vocational achievement will remain an insurmountable obstacle unless providers can effectively recognize, recruit, and retain CTE students among this population.

## Tracking Foster Youth in Illinois CTE Programs

As indicated in Perkins V, specifically under Section 7 (Definitions), providing direct services to special populations such as foster youth is a necessary resource to help these learners persist and progress through CTE program completion (P.L. 109-270). However, to ensure students with foster care experience receive the direct services and wraparound supports needed to successfully complete academic and career training, the CTE community (i.e., state leaders and program administrators) must understand the various barriers that negatively impact foster youths' college and career outcomes. Moreover, it will be incumbent on state leaders and the CTE community to juxtapose said barriers unique to foster youth with current CTE program requirements, policies, and core indicators of

performance. This critical evaluation of foster youth in CTE programs can help identify and close recruitment, retention, and completion gaps between foster youth and their non-foster care peers. However, addressing these issues begins with gathering disaggregated information on CTE program access, attempts, and attainment for students with foster care experience.

Gathering disaggregated information relative to foster youths' postsecondary experiences helps to examine the academic and career outcomes among this special population. Tracking information related to foster youth aligns with Section 112 of Perkins V, which requires state and local CTE providers to report student enrollment and achievement data, including credential/degree type, enrollment in advanced training, and employment. Data must be disaggregated—gender, race and ethnicity, age, etc.—relative to CTE programs or program of study outcomes within each of the grouped special populations (Granovskiy, 2018; P.L. 115-224).

Despite the mandate to gather disaggregated data on CTE participation and performance among special populations, information regarding current and former foster youth in CTE programs is sparse. For example, in Illinois, more than 283,000 students participated in secondary education CTE programs (ISBE, 2020), and more than 131,000 students enrolled in CTE programs at the postsecondary level. In 2018, roughly 63% of Illinois community college students earned a CTE associate's degree or certificate (ICCB, 2020; ISBE, 2020).



***State leaders and CTE program administrators should implement recruitment strategies that target students with foster care experience.***

However, little to no information about current and former foster youths' matriculation and attainment in postsecondary CTE programs is available.

Another issue to consider is how foster youth are identified at postsecondary institutions. In Illinois, the primary system for tracking foster youths' presence at colleges and universities is through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which asks: "At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?" While this information is accessible to financial aid offices and administrators at the institution of choice, it is not disseminated to program departments or campus support offices (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2016). Indeed, IDCFS has a tracking system that traces current foster youths' postsecondary enrollment based on individual applications for and distributions of various financial programs and resources available to foster youth in the state (i.e., Youth in Scholarship, Youth in College/Vocational Training Program). However, this information is not consistently disseminated to and through postsecondary institutions. Given that disaggregated data is

requested under the Perkins V Act, states like Illinois should consider developing a system that tracks detailed information relative to the progression of foster youth in postsecondary CTE programs, from recruitment to after graduation. While this may seem like an enormous challenge, it is a critical step to gaining a comprehensive view of foster youths' academic and career outcomes in CTE programs. When disaggregated data are collected, "concerns are defined, root causes are identified and analyzed, and plans are made to test solutions" (Bragg, 2017, p. 61). Thus, analyzing the participation, performance, and placement of foster youth in CTE programs helps states identify and understand the fundamental source of their academic barriers and provides targeted supports to increase students' holistic success. Since foster youth often struggle with college readiness, gathering data can help determine if and how this group is affected by the CTE program entrance requirements and provide direction on how to address opportunity gaps. Moreover, gathering disaggregated data can help determine the implementation of policy supports and initiatives, as well as how funds are allocated for programming. Without an efficient method to track foster youths' CTE program participation

and performance, identifying and troubleshooting solutions to address barriers to their academic and career success will remain an arduous process.

## Moving Forward

Perkins V enables states to provide foster youth with high-quality academic and technical training that can help ease the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The skills gained through CTE programs of study will prepare foster youth for high-wage, high-skill, in-demand occupations that can positively change life and career outcomes. However, many students with foster care histories are academically underprepared for the rigors of CTE programs or unaware of such opportunities, which prevents them from accessing these programs. To ensure that postsecondary pathways are accessible to foster youth and that their progression toward educational attainment is efficiently measured, state leaders in Illinois and CTE program administrators should consider the following efforts:

**Enhance recruitment efforts for foster youth.** State leaders and CTE program administrators should implement recruitment strategies that target students with foster care experience. For instance, states may consider engaging social-service agencies and other community-based organizations such as churches, transitional living programs, food banks, and homeless shelters as avenues to inform and promote CTE program opportunities in locations where foster youth and

caregivers may frequent. Since foster youth have limited adult support to help guide their career explorations, recruitment efforts should consist of wraparound supports to ensure foster youth understand the college process entailing program admission, requirements, and registration. It should also highlight information about potential earnings and completion timelines for specific CTE programs of study. Other recruitment efforts should include an overview of resources and campus supports available to Illinois CTE students with foster care backgrounds, such as scholarships, child care, and free textbooks. Being aware of available resources and career options can help increase foster youths' interest in CTE programs and pathways.

**Collaborate with Illinois stakeholders to strengthen CTE program pipelines.** State leaders and CTE program administrators can create a collaborative network with major Illinois stakeholders. Through collaborative networking, organizations such as IDCFS, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) can work together to strengthen pipelines to and through postsecondary education for foster youth. Research shows that 97% of Illinois students who complete CTE programs at the secondary educational level graduate from high school and are likely to enroll at a postsecondary institution after graduation (ISBE, 2020). While secondary CTE programs are a viable pathway to college for high school students, little is known about foster

youths' progression from secondary to postsecondary CTE programs. Forming a collaborative effort that includes IDCFS, along with other key Illinois educational stakeholders, can enhance the understanding of state leaders and CTE administrators in how foster youth access and progress in educational and technical programs, while collecting data about their educational needs, barriers, and outcomes.

**Track data on foster youths' intersecting identities.** Students with foster care experience are likely to have characteristics that overlap with other CTE special populations (Brown et al., 2021). For example, under Perkins V, homeless individuals are indicated as a special population for CTE programs. Given that foster youth often struggle with housing security, it is likely that a student with foster care experience may also be homeless while enrolled in a CTE program. Likewise, students who are categorized as "foster youth" can be grouped with other special populations recognized under Perkins V, such as the disabled or single parents. With so many complexities among students within CTE special populations, it is important that state leaders and CTE program administrators consider methods to capture heterogeneity among CTE students with foster care experience. Such detailed tracking can help state leaders and CTE program administrators recognize and understand the impact intersecting identities may have on students' academic and technical education. Moreover, developing a system that tracks and reports intersecting data can help

enhance accountability and monitor program effectiveness for students in special populations.

**Track data on foster youth at the institutional level.**

Although this document offers suggestions for state leaders and CTE program administrators, it is important to explore how postsecondary institutions can work in tandem with CTE programs to better track foster youths' CTE attempts and attainments. One avenue is by creating a receptive culture that recognizes, welcomes, and supports foster youth on Illinois campuses, specifically at community colleges where most postsecondary CTE programs are housed. Similar to the FAFSA application, Illinois community colleges (ICC) could consider modifying the admissions application to include a question that asks the applicant to indicate if he or she has experience in foster care. Modifying the college application to recognize foster youth provides institutions with data that confirms postsecondary interest and enrollment among foster youth. Research shows that identifying students on campus with a foster care background is challenging, which makes it difficult to support their unique needs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarto, 2010). Nonetheless, officially recognizing foster youth during the

postsecondary enrollment process helps make their presence more visible on campus. By collaborating with campus admissions, financial aid, and student/academic affairs, the institution can collect and manage data related to foster youth on campus. ICC and postsecondary CTE programs can utilize the college application process to gather preliminary data on students with foster care experience. Tracking foster youth at the institution level can provide insights on the number of foster youth accepted compared to how many enrolled, as well as students' program of study, their retention from the fall to spring semesters, and their overall academic progress while at the institution. This collected data can be used to highlight high-achieving or "exemplary cases" and "as models to evaluate and spread improvements to other programs" (Bragg, 2017, p. 61). Such detailed information can help inform strategies to increase recruitment among students with foster care experience and establish campus programming to support their unique needs (Geiger et al., 2016).

## Summary

It is evident that earning CTE credentials can create pathways to career and economic mobility for historically marginalized populations.

As policies and programs are implemented to make postsecondary CTE programs more accessible to foster youth, Illinois state leaders, CTE program administrators, and community college administrators must evaluate current strategies for tracking special populations. Tracking students with foster care experience helps to recognize them as a legitimate student population.

Additionally, collecting data about the academic and career progress of foster youth can help expose barriers and inform solutions to support their holistic success. To accomplish this goal, leaders will have to think creatively about how to effectively track their intersecting characteristics. Given the complexities within foster youths' identities, such detailed tracking will be challenging. However, the information obtained can provide insights to better measure program effectiveness and address gaps in recruitment, retention, and graduation. Equally important, gathering data on foster youth makes their presence real and visible in CTE programs—how can people effectively serve individuals they fail to fully see? If foster youth remain an invisible student population in postsecondary CTE programs, it will be easy for them to fall through the cracks.



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