

Democracy's College Podcast

Episode 39: The Impact of Campus-Based Support Programming on Foster-Care Collegians' Postsecondary Access and Retention

Announcer Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrll.illinois.edu. In this episode, Chequita Brown, a research assistant at OCCRL, talks with Maddy Day.

Chequita Brown: In this episode of Democracy's College, I have the pleasure of talking with Maddy Day about the [Fostering Success Michigan](#) statewide initiative and the impact of campus-based support programming on foster-care collegians' postsecondary access and retention. Maddy Day is a consultant for [Jimmy Casey's Youth Opportunities Initiative](#), a program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Maddy, thank you so much for being with us today.

Maddy Day: I'm so pleased to be here.

Chequita Brown: To get us started, I'd like to talk a little bit about Michigan's statewide initiative for students with experience in foster care, known as Fostering Success Michigan. I understand that you were instrumental in developing and directing this initiative. Can you share the inspiration behind the idea to launch Fostering Success Michigan and the overall mission for this statewide initiative?

Maddy Day: Absolutely. Fostering Success Michigan launched out of Western Michigan University's Center for Fostering Success and kicked off in 2012. And part of the initial idea of Fostering Success Michigan came from seeing the success of the [Seita Scholars Program](#), which is a campus support program that was started at Western Michigan University in 2018. And the Kresge Foundation was very interested in the success that the Seita Scholars Program was having to increase enrollment and persistence and graduation for students with experience in foster care, and wanted to really build infrastructure across the state of Michigan and help ensure that students, wherever they were, whatever institution they attended, were able to have that same access to success in postsecondary education.



So that was really kind of the initial seed that Fostering Success Michigan was bred from. I would also say that in the background of all of that was really what I would call the foster care in higher education movement that you could sort of trace its roots back to 1999 with Cal State Fullerton being the first

postsecondary institution to establish a campus-space support program for students with experience in foster care, but it really did kind of get even more underway in 2008 with the passing of the Fostering Connections Act, which was a child welfare federal legislation that really called upon child welfare to attend to the education success in postsecondary education planning for students with experience in foster care, and particularly for those who were going to age out of foster care without being reunified in a guardianship or adopted.

That began this movement that has really just continued to gain momentum and Fostering Success Michigan, I believe we're in the first five statewide support programs that really helped to build this infrastructure and develop this collective impact framework around foster care and higher education.

Chequita Brown:

You talked a little bit about this movement and Michigan being one of the forerunners of having this statewide initiative. Based on your experience working with Fostering Success Michigan, what are some of the pros and cons of having a statewide initiative that targets *specifically* students with experience in foster care?

Maddy Day:

I'm going to be totally biased and say I probably have very few cons because I think it's so essential. One of the largest pros is that this work is doing the work of building a bridge between two institutions, education—and particularly higher education—and child welfare that don't have a whole lot of overlap in how they understand each other, but yet are *very* essential and are in the daily lives of the students that they're impacting.

And so, having a backbone organization really provides the ability for alignment, kind of cross walking between definitions and policies and practices, and really holding folks to a common agenda around this shared vision. And I haven't met anybody yet in this work that says, "No, we don't want students with experience in foster care to go to college." I have met many people who don't believe that that's possible because of the experiences that students have faced or who don't see a pathway forward because they don't understand how either the education system works or the child welfare system works.

So, I really think the huge pro comes with creating this common agenda, creating this shared vision, bringing people around data so that they can really ground their work and their progress in something tangible and real. And then I would also say having a central organization that can really center this work around the voice of young people, and that at the end of the day this work has really nothing if it's not infused with the knowledge and the voices of the young people who are impacted by these systems.

If there's a con, I think in some ways it might be that this work is not cheap. I'll just say that. This is not work that can be done in that frame of "other duties as assigned," and it really does need to have dedicated workforce, dedicated financial support. It becomes a challenge in building some of that infrastructure up, but I think that the benefits, the pros, far outweigh the cons.

Chequita Brown:

You mentioned this idea of having a shared agenda as it relates to postsecondary programming and support for foster youth who are on campus. I noticed on your résumé that you were very instrumental in co-founding the [Champions Program](#) at the University of Washington, and based off of what I read, it talked about how you did that during your graduate-school experience, and I thought that was amazing because you saw a need and you *responded*. I wanted to kind of spend a little time speaking about that experience, specifically for listeners who are saying, "We know that there is a need for services on our campus for foster-care youth, but where do we start? How does this work? Do we have to have all our ducks in a row in order to serve this population?" And you being a graduate student at the time clearly-

Maddy Day:

I did not have my ducks in a row. I can tell you that.

Chequita Brown:

Right. I get it. So wanting to highlight that, can you share with our listeners the vision behind the Champions Program at the University of Washington and your whole process and getting started with that?

Maddy Day:

I'm going to tell a quick story because it really frames how all of this came together. I came out of my undergraduate work and was a case worker working in primarily adoption and primarily foster adoption. And, you know, I did a variety of things in casework, from case management to licensing, and I ended up doing child placement for permanency and adoptive homes. And I placed many, many kids. There were many, many success stories, and there were the handful of kids that I either placed and the placement fell apart, or I would see again and again and again these profiles just coming across my desk and thinking, "There's no family for this kid, and it's our fault that we did this." And I had this deep ache, I would say. When kids come into foster care, they come into foster care through no fault of their own. And we then as a state are responsible for them, which means that we as citizens of that state hold some responsibility for them.

And when we get to a point where it's not going to be likely that they can return to their parents, their family, how is it that we're just okay with saying, "Okay, well I guess you just age out into—*what?*" And the statistics *continue* to be very troubling, and they were even more so troubling; you know, this is early 2000s. And it really was this thing that I just felt so convicted by. And I actually said to a friend prior to starting graduate school, I said, "You know, I've been over this and over this in my mind, and I think that the *only* thing that we can give young people that we could never take away from them is an education." And I said, "Because we can take away their siblings; we can take away their clothes; we can take away their friends; their school, their family, their pets. Anything that we can give them, we can absolutely take it away when they are in foster care. But we can't take away education because once you have that, that is yours."

So, I had this in the back of my mind and I started graduate school. And truth be told, I thought, "Graduate school is my opportunity to actually do something

completely different than child welfare. Let me go do that." But I kept just having this feeling of like, "I'm here on this campus and I am seeing people who've been impacted by foster care. They're my colleagues, they're my professors, they're undergraduate students that I'm getting to know. There's got to be something that we could do." So I had the opportunity to write a paper, an organizational assessment, as many in a social program has done. And I said, you know, "Well, if the University of Washington wanted to have an impact on students from foster care, this is actually what they should do. And these are the systems within the university that could be mobilized around this, and this is the capacity that they have to attend to this."

And really a lot of it was building streams of communication, having a space for people to communicate about resources, having the ability for key people to be visible to students when they needed them most, and then having somebody that could kind of help students navigate all of that and help the professionals navigate all of that. So this was sort of, you know, this idea. I wrote it great, whatever, and I happened to have connections with the vice president of minority affairs and diversity at the University of Washington, Dr. Sheila Edwards Lang. And I sent the paper to her, kind of on a whim and just said, "I wonder what you think about this. This is a diversity issue for the university." And yes, this was when we were really hitting the financial crisis with the recession. But if we don't do something now, then when are we going to do something?

And so, she basically said, "All right, make it happen." And there was some structures within the university at the time that I was able to leverage pretty quickly, one of them being a statewide scholarship that Washington State had, called the Governor's Scholarship, that I was able to leverage. So we had money that was identified to scholarship these students, which meant we had some identified students. And there was somebody that was administering that money, and so my colleague Jennifer Shone and I started building the program from there. Basically said, "We have these 18 students that we have identified. Let's talk to them. Let's figure out what they need. Let's go to the research."

We happened to be in Seattle where Casey Family Programs is, and I was able to really pick the brain of my colleague John Emerson, who's since retired, but who was really at the forefront of developing and articulating the best practices around postsecondary support for students in foster care. We just started building little by little. And the first piece that we built was what I called the Board of Champions. And I truly will say it's because I didn't have my ducks in a row, like you said, and I really didn't—even though I was a student—I didn't fully understand how the university works, which I think even when we work in universities, they can seem a little bit like a labyrinth.

And what I knew was there were some key people that I needed: I needed financial aid. I needed admissions. I needed the folks who were doing academic advising and health and mental health services, housing. You know, I needed these folks at the table to tell me how *they* can help, and that was really what it

was. So I sent out this email, probably fairly brazenly, saying, "Hey, I've been charged by the vice president to do this thing. Would you come to this meeting?" And I also brought in a couple of the students that were receiving the Governor's Scholarship, and that became our advisory board. And then we added community partners to that board. We added other different departments in the university to that board. And really for the first three years of that program, that board was the place that I went to and said, "Here's the next problem that we need to solve. Let's get together and solve it."

I found a very small budget from somewhere—I don't know where—to buy everybody lunch. And that seemed to be enough of an incentive. And I'll say, one of the things that I remember very early on hearing from our financial aid—we'd call them champions, so our financial aid champion, who was the assistant director of financial aid, she said, "You know, Maddy, I know you think you're asking me to do *more* work, but actually this is less work because now I know that there are these other people that can support this student. I'm not stressed out trying to meet every need. So when they come to me with a financial aid question that's actually a housing question or maybe a food insecurity question." She doesn't have to just fix it all with financial aid. She can call these colleagues, they can meet with the student, they can all meet together, problem solved and move forward.

So that really kind of became the way the Champions Program was built. I knew that I was not the person to run the program. I could see what students needed in this way of needing a person they could always reach out to, whether it was crisis, whether it was, "Hey, I passed my test. I'm so excited." Whether it was, "I just need to ask somebody for advice." They could reach out to that. And so that's when I brought in my colleague Melissa Rapp, who continues to be the director of the program to this day. And she really carved out that space of what does it mean to be the designated support staff for this program and what does that role really take on? What does it look like? And so I was able to kind of build the structure and help build programming elements, and she was really able to build out that, how do you meet students where they're at?

Chequita Brown:

It sounds like that cross-campus collaboration was very essential to keeping this program moving and even getting it off the ground, *and* to even identifying and resolving some of those challenges facing that student pop?

Maddy Day:

Absolutely. And you know, one of the things that I learned, and I just think when we're in academia, sometimes we forget, but it's actually really easy just to ask people, "Hey, can you tell me again what you do?" Just like, "Oh, yeah, this is what I do." These are the resources I had. I truly, I remember being like blown away when we finally invited somebody from career services because, of course, the purpose of graduating is to gain access into the working world, and they had all these resources, resources about discovering what your spark is and your talent and all these things that I, as a student who had gone there for undergrad and graduate school, had no idea about.

There's a lot of power when you don't ask people to do more; you just ask them to do what they do best. And, like, students thrive when they are able to be connected to the experts in those things, and it's something that I think we kind of forget and maybe think that we need to be the experts in all things for students.

Chequita Brown: Right, right.

Maddy Day: But that's really not the way that it should be.

Chequita Brown: You've hit a lot of different points and I want to kind of dig a little bit into some of the challenges facing students with experience in foster care. Based on your experience and even working with collegians who have experience in foster care, what type of supports are needed to help increase their academic retention? And then what are some of the challenges that they're facing? I know we talked about food insecurity, but what can we expect? You know, *me*, if I was working with a foster youth or a student who had experience in foster youth on campus, what are some things I should look for that are challenges that can impede their academic retention?

Maddy Day: One of the overarching themes that I often talk about is young people who exit foster care—age out or emancipate, however you refer to it—have not had similar opportunities to young people who had the family privilege of being raised in a home with consistent caregivers. And so this opportunity gap is something that we really see fairly consistently for young people. So sometimes that means that you have a young person who seems like they've got it all together, and they're doing fine, and then you realize that they are working like three times as hard as every other student to keep it all together because they've figured out the workaround, but they actually haven't figured out how to do it in the way that is going to allow them to thrive.

And so, it's really helping students to peel back those layers of what skills they need to develop. And usually one of the first skills that they need support to develop is around asking for help. And part of what we unfortunately do in child welfare is we do a lot of, "No, you don't have control over that. I'm doing that for you. I'm just going to take care of that." We don't give young people the opportunity to try something and fail safely. You may see a young person that now, at this magical age of 18 or 21, whenever they're aging out of care, they're now in charge of maintaining all of their health records, maintaining all of their health care, finding housing, maintaining housing, cooking for themselves, buying clothes for themselves, figuring out transportation—all things that up until this age of 18 were done for them.

So there's often just skills lacking around those ways in which you meet your basic needs. Now, I would say most of the young people that have experienced foster care that I meet can absolutely meet their basic needs. They find a way around that, but it's often not a way that is going to allow them to focus on school, to be in a healthy place of thriving, and taking care of their

responsibilities. So it's helping kind of peel back those layers to figure out, you know, you can do it this way, but *should* you? Let's figure out how you should do this.

The other thing that I think, in some ways it kind of goes without saying and in some ways these are similar things to many student populations, but the challenges of the impact of trauma. For many young people in foster care, they haven't had the opportunity to fully process through the trauma they experienced both before they entered foster care and while in care. And so now that they're in this more independent space, it's the first time that they're able to really reconcile that trauma and the impact that it's had. And they may not be prepared for the way that it's going to show up in their life. And the triggers that happen are very real, and they often do not have coping skills that allow them to work through that, really, in a healthy way.

And so that's something that we're really keen on attending to: a student's mental health. And even for those students that just seem like, "I have it all together." It's like, "Okay, so what coping skills do you use and how do you know when you're stressed? Where do you feel that stress in your body?" Some of that that students just haven't been able to connect with.

And the last thing that I would say that I think often people don't think about or maybe don't expect is that many of our young people, when they are going into college, this is the first time that they may be able to reconnect with bio family that they were not able to have a relationship with while they were in foster care. Sometimes that's a really great connection; sometimes that's not. Either way, it's going to be sort of fraught with emotional challenges. Sometimes we find young people end up taking on the financial caregiving for some of those family members, whether that's younger siblings, whether it's parents, caregivers. And sometimes there's young people who are pregnant and parenting themselves. So that adds another layer of responsibility, challenge, and stress on top of a student that, like any student, is going to face their normal stresses and challenges.

There's opportunities for us to work with young people on financial literacy, work with young people on healthy boundaries, work with young people on parenting and relationship skills, and really kind of having, I would say in many ways just a much more frank dialogue than you may typically have with other students where they have consistent caregivers at home that they can call and talk to. And I would say, in my experience, I'll say to a student, "I'm going to keep it 100. You know, I'm going to keep it real with you and tell you what I think. You don't have to take my advice, but I want you to have the information that I think that you need." And part of that is just, I don't want to assume that they are going to find out that information from somebody who is healthy. And so we have those conversations and students are able to take that information and do with it what they want, but it's really important that we are able to hold that authentic space with students.

Chequita Brown:

Right. And even in holding that authentic space with students and having someone to even bounce those ideas off of because it is important and most of the time they are looking for guidance. My question to follow up to some of the things that you said, because they're very important, is how do we even find these students on our campus to even support them? Because, yes, they are dealing with those challenges, but one of our challenges, I would imagine, is actually identifying them once they're on campus. With your experience working with Fostering Success Michigan as well as the Champions Program, wanted to see if you can share some information with us about strategies, specifically for our audience who are advisors or student-affairs professionals. What can we do to identify those students and inform them of the services and supports that are available on our campus?

Maddy Day:

So, I'm going to give you a technical answer and an adaptive answer, and it really takes both. The technical answer is that if you are on a campus, your financial aid office does have the ability to look through the FAFSA and look at question 53 on the FAFSA and see who has checked that box. That question is stated roughly something like, "Are you or have you ever been in foster care after your thirteenth birthday?" It might say foster care or ward of the court. So a student checks that, it marks them as independent on the FAFSA, qualifies for full Pell, does several other things, right?

So part of the challenge with that is some of our policies with FIRPA cause some challenge in being able to directly reach out; if you're, say, a student-affairs person, directly reach out through that information. So my recommendation is to work with your financial aid office and prepare a letter, an email, some sort of communication that is sent to the students who indicate that they have had experience in foster care, and highlight the benefits of why they would reach out and connect with you. I usually say put in something about money, put in something about food, put in something about academic advising so that they have some tangible things to go, "Oh, you can provide these services. You can provide support in this way." Because usually that's what students are looking for. They're not going to respond if you're like, "I'm really a fun person and you can talk to me about anything." You know, build that relationship first.

Chequita Brown:

Right.

Maddy Day:

Then you can get to that kind of talk about anything phase. That's one piece. Some institutions have also addressed this through developing in supplemental materials that are sent to students after they've been accepted. They develop a sort of supplemental, I don't want to say assessment, but kind of a questionnaire that asks students about a variety of things that may qualify them for resources on campus, and then they also follow up that way. Other kind of piece of that is if you have, let's say a Trio program, Student Success Services, or Upward Bound, those programs do have in their authorization of populations to serve, students with experience in foster care are listed in those programs. And so, if you can create a relationship with your Trio programs and have them identify those students, then that can be another way. That can also be a way to

sort of ground services that you may want to offer through those Trio programs. So those are kind of the technical pieces.

The adaptive piece, I will say, is creating a foster care-aware community, and that's something that through Fostering Success Michigan, it was really one of our major intentions. We want to change the narrative around the stigma of foster care. We want to create a foster care-aware community, a community that celebrates the diversity of experiences that students have, including the foster-care experience. A community that is aware that when you have a parent orientation, it may not be a parent orientation.

Chequita Brown: Right.

Maddy Day: So think about how you can reframe that. Maybe it's a caregiver orientation, maybe it's a supportive adult orientation. Shifting your language to become more aware of the realities of the diversity of our student populations. So many of our campuses have things in May where they'll celebrate National Foster Care month and talk about the students' stories, the successes, the opportunities to engage around supporting people who have experienced foster care. And so, changing that narrative so it's not a stigma to sort of out yourself; it's really something that is seen as a valuable part of the diversity of this campus community.

Chequita Brown: Yeah. That's very good. I'm going to ask our last question. This is our call to action. This is what we would like to leave with our listeners. What advice would you like to share in terms of strategies for developing and launching a postsecondary, campus-based program? Let's say if one of our listeners is at an institution where they feel that passion like you described in the beginning of our discussion and they say, "Well, what can I do?" What advice would you give them?

Maddy Day: I would say everybody can do something, so just know that no matter what position you're in within an institution, you have the power to positively change and impact the lives of young people with experience in foster care. That's kind of always my blanket statement. Specifically, I would say if you are seeking to develop supports, programming, anything for students with experience in foster care, center that work around the voices of the students of foster care in your community. To do this work well, we have to do it in partnership with our students. We have to do it with their experience in mind, their voices at the table.

I can say I had what I thought to be many great ideas. You know, "Oh, we're going to do this with programming. We're going to have a place for students—they can all live in the same floor in a dorm." Now I look back and I'm like, "That would've been a disaster." And it was students that were on our advisory board that saved me from making that decision, that said, "Listen, it's great. I want to be in community with other students that have experienced foster care. I don't need to live with them 24/7." And I can tell you, I've sat in many rooms with

campuses that I've consulted with, where they've had that same idea and I just laugh and I'm like, "I'm with you. I was with you. It's a bad idea. And our students every time say, "That's a bad idea. Please don't force me to live like I'm in a group home again." You know, and it's just like, "Oh, right!"

Again and again, the programs that are out there that are the strongest, where students feel the most empowered, and where you see students taking leadership are programs informed by students with experience in foster care on their campus—the design of the program, the evaluation of the program, the service delivery of the program. And no matter how small of a campus, I *promise* you there is somebody that has experienced foster care. There's probably many people. They're probably on your faculty. They're probably on your staff. They're probably doing maintenance work and other support services. You have *somebody* who can give voice to that experience. So if you haven't found your students yet, there are people that you can go to to say, "Hey, I would love your thoughts as we develop this." And then when you find those students, *keep them at the table*. Absolutely honor and value the voice that you have when you have those students at the table, because they will truly provide you the greatest insight to how to develop this program.

Chequita Brown: Thank you *so much*, Maddy Day.

Maddy Day: You're so welcome!

Chequita Brown: It was such a pleasure talking to you. You are such a wealth of knowledge, and I'm looking forward to continuing this partnership with you.

Maddy Day: Absolutely, absolutely. Well, I'm so glad you're shining a light on this topic, and I'm always available should anybody who's listening want to follow up, have further conversations. I'm such a believer that postsecondary education should be a *right* and not a privilege for our students with experience in foster care, and that it's really on us as the professionals in these systems to make sure they have what they need to thrive in those systems.

Chequita Brown: I agree. Thank you so much.

Maddy Day: Thank you.

Announcer Sal Nudo: Tune in next month as Chequita Brown continues the conversation on foster-care youth when she chats with Patricia Palmer, the program coordinator of the Education and Training Vouchers Program within the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

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