

A Framework to Approach Postsecondary Educational Program Design for College Students with Lived Experience in Foster Care

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The trajectory for postsecondary education achievement for young adults who experienced foster care placement in childhood is dismal. Compared to their peers, youth in foster care have lower rates of high school graduation (50% vs. 70%), college enrollment (20% vs. 60%), and college graduation (5% vs. 20%) (Wolanin, 2005). However, through evolving governmental policies and supportive campus-based programs, progress is being made toward addressing the achievement gaps impacting this population. This article outlines how key federal and state policies and campus-based support programs employing an integrative framework are contributing to addressing the achievement gaps impacting this population.

Policy

Through various policy initiatives that have evolved over time, the federal government has recognized the need to address college access for youth with experience in foster care. Specifically, the [John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program](#) targets educational attainment for young adults with experience in foster care, effectively giving colleges and universities a policy avenue to create strategies for education and self-sufficiency among their students with experience in foster care. This program offers flexible funding grants to states to support independent living resources for transition-age (i.e. 16 to 23 years old) young adults in foster care. States can apply for education and training vouchers, which can be up to \$5,000 per year per student, to support educational goals. These vouchers represent a critical source of support to young people aging out of foster care and pursuing postsecondary education; however, the efficacy of the education and training voucher program, specifically the procedures for young people to access funds in support of their postsecondary goals, remains an unanswered research question.

Within general foster care policies, the Title IV-E section of the Social Security Act ensures categorical eligibility to federal funding to states in the provision of foster care services. This includes support services aiming to improve outcomes in any domain deemed critical to safety, well-being, or permanence. States are reimbursed by the federal government for allowable expenditures without regard to the number of youth in care. In 2008, this categorical eligibility was extended to include youth up to age 21 through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P. L. 110-351). This updated law expanded categorical payments to include transportation to school and required each case plan to include completion of secondary education and verification of school attendance. Within this framework, state government agencies are encouraged to identify programmatic



Students with experience in foster care speak to participants about the need to develop interdependent relationships to

supports related to educational attainment through the state planning process. The supports can take the form of education navigators or specialized case managers who focus on increasing educational attainment among foster youth. Thoughtful implementation of education-focused programs can create a pathway for current and former youth with experience in foster care to access college, starting with promoting expectations of attending college as early as elementary school. Colleges and other institutions may work directly with state agencies to include collaborating around these goals as part of that state's Title IV-E plan.

Other opportunities to expand access and successful completion of college for young adults with experience in foster care are embedded in other broad policy areas focused on self-sufficiency. For example, two of the primary policy areas that fit this category are food and cash assistance. First, the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP) can provide food

assistance to students attending college. States may apply for waivers and/or assert categorical eligibility to include more students in their SNAP population. Second, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can allow students with children to include attendance in college as a component of meeting work requirements to receive this cash assistance. The federal government contracts with the [Urban Institute](#) to maintain a database of state plans that identify which states support educational attainment in this manner.

Many of the policies that support postsecondary achievement for students with experience in foster care are jointly executed in partnership between state and federal government agencies. This means that there can be great variety in the options that states choose to take up in their state planning processes. Given this variability, a promising approach for postsecondary institutions interested in enhancing support for this population is to identify which agencies within their state are responsible for the planning process for each of these areas and partner to enhance the state plans by utilizing resources at the postsecondary institution. The development of campus-based support programs, discussed below, highlights the success of leveraging postsecondary resources. When this collaboration is successful it can improve the likelihood for success for not only students with experience in foster care, but also a broad range of students in need of additional support to succeed in higher education.

Campus-Based Programs

Colleges vary in their engagement of policy to ensure that students with experience in foster care have the best possible chance to maintain the necessities of life while trying to achieve academic success. The variation in programming approaches is partially explained by the fact that support services designed for college students who have experienced foster care placement is a relatively new field of practice (Gillum, Lindsay, Murray & Wells, 2016). There is consensus in the research that poor academic preparation, mental health conditions, and lack of financial aid are common barriers for this population, while individual personal strengths and social supports appear to serve as protective factors (Gillum et al., 2016). While these challenges are present for many underrepresented student populations, students with experience in foster care face additional obstacles to thriving and succeeding in postsecondary education that go well beyond academic achievement and college preparation. The adverse and traumatic childhood experiences of many former foster youth are marked by abuse, neglect, family separation, a caseworker-managed childhood, sub-optimal living arrangements, multiple caregivers, and school changes. These are a few conditions that alter how young people from foster care learn to perceive the world and relate to others.



Students at a Fostering Success Michigan Statewide Summit support support students in their transition to college.

Establishing a designated program to support students who have experienced foster care is essential to their college success (Cantú, 2014). At the very least, designated staff are needed to help students navigate the maze of policy-prescribed efforts in order to access the benefits available to them and to address the disparities that are part of the foster care experience (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). The first campus-based program to target support for college students who aged out of foster care began in 1998 at California State University, Fullerton. Since then a range of programs have emerged on college campuses; however, program descriptions and evaluations are scarce (Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016). Multiple states, including Arizona, California, Georgia, Michigan, Texas, Virginia, Ohio, and Washington, are leading the way in pioneering this work. While this population of students faces many common foster care-related barriers, the programs range widely in scope, staffing, and services. Strategies to develop campus-based programs targeting students from foster care as a subset of the college population began to be articulated with a case study approach of existing programs (Casey Family Programs, 2010). More recently, an ideal program concept was designed based on available research knowledge (Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016 ; Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016). Other approaches to program development have emphasized student voice as part of program development (Unrau, 2011). Evaluations of existing programs are only beginning to emerge in the research literature.

In Michigan, a pioneering effort to increase the college graduation rates among young people aging out of foster care has been underway for nearly a decade. The effort transformed into the Center for Fostering Success, which has three main programs. The first program, established in 2008, is a comprehensive campus-based effort, known as the Seita Scholars Program, and aims to increase graduation rates among students with experience in foster care by addressing their unique needs in the college setting (Unrau, 2011; Unrau, Hamilton, & Putney, 2010). Through financial scholarships, safe housing during semester breaks, and holistic life coaching support by trained “campus coaches,” students are supported through college with a view to ensuring that each graduate is also prepared for the transition from college to career given the absence of a reliable family safety net. The second program, established in 2012, is Fostering Success Michigan, a statewide outreach effort utilizing a collective impact framework focused on building networks of organizations and people, bridging the pre-college and college arenas, to support students as they journey through foster care and into, and through, postsecondary education. The third program, established in 2013, is the Fostering Success Coach Training program, which provides a practice framework for professionals who are charged with supporting students from foster care to succeed in college.

Information on foster care state plans and federal guidance related to promoting educational stability and college readiness is available via the Administration for Children and Families website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/ed-hhs-foster-care-non-regulatory-guidance>.

Seven Life Domains Framework

Each of the three Center for Fostering Success programs relies upon a common life domains framework from which to develop services. Specifically, Casey Family Programs (2001) identified seven domains as key for organizing support for young people preparing to make the transition from foster care to adulthood. The Center for Fostering Success adapted the Seven Life Domains framework such that education was made the central focus of program support nested in the other life domains (Figure 1). While education is central in this adaptation of the framework, each life domain integrally ties to the outcome of academic success for students with experience in foster care. In practice, the Seven Life Domains framework offers professionals, supportive adults, and students a concrete way to organize, understand, and develop a response to the complexity of the lives of students with experience in foster care who are transitioning into young adulthood through the college experience. Below is a sample of “street-level” challenges experienced by young people across each of the domains.

Academics and Education. Instead of a family network of support to rely upon, youth transitioning from foster care to college must navigate systems of support, which may include courts, state agencies, Medicaid, and community mental health services. Without consistent supportive adults and caregivers to guide them, youth find it more difficult to prepare for postsecondary education and nurture aspirations for educational achievement. Furthermore, despite recent policy improvements aimed at increasing education stability, placement changes during the foster care experience are often accompanied by changes in schools and result in falling behind in both credits and academic progress (Burley & Halpern, 2001). For those young adults who make their way to a college campus, the challenges to persisting through higher education are those of their peers compounded by the need to navigate two complex networks of support: that of the college campus and the network of resources students bring with them from their foster care experience.

Housing. Young adults with a background in foster care experience higher rates of homelessness (Pecora et al., 2006). When young people in foster care are discharged from foster care by the courts without sufficient supports, which can take place as early as 18 years old, they are at much greater risk. Disrupting care and supportive services at a time when many are completing their senior year of high school can disable their efforts to complete school. When young adults exit foster care, not only are they likely to leave their placement (i.e. foster home, congregate care facility), but other state-funded support services are scaled back or terminated. This transition increases the risk of these young adults experiencing homelessness or “couch surfing.” Their instability in placement may derail their progress toward high school graduation, making their plans to attend college even more out of reach. For those students with experience in foster care who matriculate to college, the challenges to secure safe, affordable, and stable housing continue. Students with experience in foster care who are able to live in residence halls can find themselves without a place to stay during the semester breaks when dorms close. For those students attending community colleges, or four-year colleges in urban communities where housing is in high demand, there is the additional challenge of finding an affordable living arrangement in the community that is accessible to school, work, social supports, and other services.



Figure 1. The Seven Life Domains Framework

Finances and Employment. Students who spend at least one day in foster care on or after their 13th birthday are classified as independent according to federal financial aid standards (College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 P.L. 110–84). Although it varies state-by-state, their foster care status qualifies them for federal- and state-funded grants, scholarships, and tuition waivers that reduce the amount of loans needed to pay for a college education. Despite the financial aid available, students with experience in foster care need additional support to be made aware of and fully access these resources (Government Accountability Office, 2016). In addition to the challenges of accessing financial resources, the majority of young adults with experience in foster care are not prepared to manage lump sums paid out by financial aid, nor are they prepared to save funds, financially plan for the future, or complete responsibilities such as filing annual tax returns. Employment struggles are common for young adults from foster care, especially in earning a living wage (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013). Many young adults lack the skills needed to engage in a workplace effectively, and the high mobility of foster care leads to a lack of social capital, which is becoming increasingly more essential to finding employment.

Physical and Mental Health. Most young people in foster care have grown up experiencing abuse and neglect, as well as conditions of poverty such as poor nutrition and living in unsafe neighborhoods. Post-traumatic stress in response to the conditions leading to entering foster care, and continued experiences while in foster care, is common. In fact, post-traumatic stress disorder is sometimes experienced at higher rates among youth who have been in foster care than among returning war veterans (Courtney et al., 2011). Multiple placement changes can mean new medical providers with a variety of treatment styles; additionally, physical and mental health care is often managed by a caseworker or foster care provider without input from the youth (White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buher, 2015). While the Affordable Care Act has created provisions for young adults who age out of foster care to maintain their Medicaid status until age 26, when a young person enters college, they may also be navigating the health and mental health care system on their own for the first time.

Social Relationships and Community Connections. The experience of foster care disrupts relationships with the family unit, and since many of the supportive relationships that young people with experience in foster care engage in are with professionals who enter the young person's life on a temporary basis, these youth often become accustomed to transactional relationships with adults (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2011). Necessarily, young adults with experience in foster care have difficulty establishing a supportive and consistent relationship with an adult. Additionally, the high mobility of young people in foster care does not lend itself to developing and maintaining peer connections. The postsecondary setting provides many opportunities for young adults to engage with both peers and professionals in a positive way; however, many lack the skills necessary to navigate these relationships successfully.

Personal and Cultural Identity. The child welfare and justice systems are fraught with institutionalized racism and prejudice (Miller, Cahn, Anderson-Nathe, Cause, & Bender, 2013); moreover, neither system is equipped to address effectively the nuances and intersectionality of the multiple identities that a young person with experience in foster care holds. While there are often spaces on college campuses to explore and connect with racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender identities, students with experience in foster care are rarely able to find each other and do the work of understanding the culture of foster care and how their foster care experiences contribute to their sense of self. Unfortunately, a negative stigma around foster care still exists, and young people growing up in foster care tend to hide the fact of their foster care status for fear of negative stereotyping and being treated differently by others. Withholding one's foster care status not only can prevent the receipt of much needed financial resources, but also keeps students with experience in foster care in a space of otherness, unable to integrate their past experience with their present.

Life Skills. Young people growing up in foster care often have to acquire skills and a mindset beyond their age and in developmental stage. The sentiment that they must grow up faster than their peers is common among transition-age young adults with experience in foster care. This may result in them having acquired some positive independent living skills such as doing laundry, relying upon oneself to problem solve, and packing belongings at an earlier age. However, many youth in foster care learn a sense of "pseudo-independence" as they are abruptly launched into independence upon exiting the dependency inherent in the foster care system (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). For college students with experience in foster care, exposure gaps from a disrupted childhood often challenge the development of adaptive life skills needed to navigate higher education. Furthermore, the belief that one has to be independent to survive may confound their ability to develop the life skills necessary for interdependent success.

Integration of Approach in Programming. The great challenge of campus-based support programs is to design services and support strategies that comprehensively address the complex web of challenges across the Seven Life Domains as outlined above. Despite these dynamic issues, solutions are beginning to emerge at policy and program levels. At the policy level, there is recognition that young people from foster care need supports across multiple life domains. Efforts continue to bring awareness of the need to cross-reference differentiated federal programs to improve coordinated service delivery at the state level to support successful transition from foster care to college. At the program level, it is too early to tell which models of support are most effective in creating college experiences not

only to help college students from foster care thrive, but also to fully succeed in achieving a college degree. The Fostering Success Coach model (Unrau & Bennett, 2017) is a unifying practice framework used by professionals who are working in a variety of program settings. It is an approach to student support specific to young adults who have experienced the adversity of foster care. This approach emphasizes relationship skills formed in the coach-student dyad to tackle challenges in college, while also focusing on specific knowledge and skills across the seven domains. The field of campus-based support for students in foster care is ripe for discovery and investigation. Using the seven domains framework, there is ample opportunity for developing differentiated models of support to yield the greatest opportunity for academic and life success for students with experience in foster care.

For individuals seeking more information and resources to aid in increasing postsecondary education access and success, the [Fostering Success Michigan Website](#) provides over 500 resources spanning the Seven Life Domains. This website also features the only National Postsecondary Support Map, highlighting tuition waivers, statewide child welfare and higher education coordinating organizations (i.e. Fostering Success Michigan, California College Pathways, etc.), and campus support programs at four-year postsecondary institutions across the country.



Student leaders at the 2016 Michigan Young Leader Advocacy Summit

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