



## Conceptualizing on-campus support programs for collegiate foster youth and alumni: A plan for action



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### ABSTRACT

Increasingly, post-secondary education institutions are implementing supplemental support programs to assist foster youth and alumni (i.e., those formerly in foster care) matriculating into higher education. Despite the promise of these academic support programs in helping young people achieve their educational goals, the empirical educational research literature related to these support programs is nominal. This study employed Concept Mapping (CM) with a convenience sample of 51 foster youth/alumni in one southeastern state to explicate a conceptual framework for the development of campus supports for collegiate foster youth/alumni, and examine priority areas (e.g., importance and feasibility). CM is a mixed-method research approach that employs non-metric multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analyses to analyze qualitative data. As a result, visual representations of the data are computed. The final cluster map yielded an eight cluster solution: *Campus Awareness, Advocacy, Data Tracking, Pre-College Supports, Fostering Family Connections, Academic Financing, Campus Life, and Peer/Mentor Supports*. Foster youth/alumni in this study perceived the *Pre-College Supports* cluster as most feasible, while the *Advocacy* cluster was rated at the least feasible. The *Academic Financing* cluster was rated as the most important; the *Campus Life* cluster was rated as the least important. After a review of pertinent literature, this paper explicates CM methodology as applied to the current study, reports results, and discusses lessons learned as they apply to child welfare research and practice.

Increasingly, post-secondary education institutions are implementing supplemental support programs to assist foster youth and alumni (i.e., those formerly in foster care) matriculating into higher education. Programs such as *Seita Scholars* at Western Michigan University, *Unconquered Scholars* at Florida State University, *Forward* at Sam Houston State University, *Guardian Scholars* at University of California – Davis, *Transition to Independence* at Wayne State University, and *Embrace* at the University of Kentucky are but a few examples of this burgeoning practice.

Despite the promise of these academic support programs in helping young people achieve their educational goals, the empirical educational research literature related to these support programs is nominal (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). Specifically, few, if any, published conceptual frameworks, use the perspective of foster youth and alumni themselves, to guide the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of these programs.

This study reports on the use of Concept Mapping (CM) methodology to explicate a conceptual framework germane to the development, and subsequent evaluation, of on-campus academic support

programs for collegiate foster youth and alumni. Additionally, this research examines priority differences related to two variables: importance and feasibility. CM is a participatory, mixed-method research approach that analyzes qualitative data, via quantitative statistical procedures, namely multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis. After a terse review of relevant background literature, this paper will delineate research findings; discuss the results; and, identify apposite educational practice and research implications.

### 1. Background

#### 1.1. Higher education and foster youth

Few would argue the benefits of a college education. Cumulatively, studies show that education is a significant determinant for upward social mobility (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Researchers have surmised that individuals with a college degree can expect to earn considerably more than those without a degree, are more likely to receive health and pension benefits, be more active citizens,

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and lead a healthier lifestyle when compared to their non-degreed counterparts (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Caumont, 2014). Existing evidence leaves little doubt about the positive impact that a college degree may have on one's life.

For the over 400,000 youths currently in foster care, the estimated 23,000 individuals who “age out” of the system each year (AFCARS, 2014), and the approximately 12 million foster care alumni in the U.S. (Foster Care Alumni of America, 2012), post-secondary education can be a vital component of a successful transition to adulthood (e.g., Graham, Schellinger, & Vaughn, 2015; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Though individuals in and from foster care desire to go to college and obtain a degree (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Nixon & Jones, 2007; Watt et al., 2013), evidence suggests that post-secondary educational outcomes for foster youth lag far behind those of their non-fostered peers. Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, and Colvin (2011) estimated that as few as 1 in 10 foster youth and alumni enroll in a college or university. Other researchers have made similar assertions (e.g., Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Emerson, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005). Perhaps even more disconcerting is that youth who do attend college are less likely to earn a college degree, when compared to the general population (e.g., Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

Myriad studies have documented plausible reasons foster youth and alumni struggle in college. Several researchers have suggested that individuals from foster care are less-prepared than other students. In summary, as compared to their counterparts, foster youth and alumni are more likely to (a) be enrolled in or eligible for special education curricula (Macomber, 2009); (b) have experienced multiple school settings (McNaught, 2009; Vacca, 2008); (c) be dealing with behavior and mental/emotional health challenges (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012), and (d) have attended poorer quality schools (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004; Stuart Foundation, 2013). All these factors contribute to a lack of college preparedness for some youth and alumni. Indeed, as Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2011 aptly concluded: “students from foster care are significantly different from their non-foster-care peers in their readiness to engage in college” (p. 212).

Several authors have detailed problematic occurrences for the relatively few foster youth and alumni who do enroll in college. For instance, Dworsky and Courtney (2010) asserted that many youth and alumni experience insecure housing and employment situations, thus, making completing college an ancillary priority. Further, poor academic guidance, an inability to deal and cope with complex social climates, poor overall well-being, and a lack of external support systems make matriculating into college educational programs difficult for foster youth/alumni (Cohn & Kelly, 2015). In describing the impact of these phenomena, Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012) asserted, when it comes to college, many foster youth and alumni are simply “on their own...” (p. 1009).

### 1.2. Policy efforts and programmatic responses: academic support programs for foster youth

Higher education institutions have a vested stake in ensuring that young people in general (Ajinkya, Brabender, Chen, & Moreland, 2015), and foster youth, specifically (Kirk & Day, 2011), graduate in a timely manner. That said, in order to assuage many of the challenges and problematic outcomes noted above, college and university administrators, faculty, and staff have developed on-campus academic support programs for those in and from foster care. Though the development of these programs were originally concentrated in western states, such as California and Washington (Dworsky & Perez, 2009), schools across the country have begun to deploy similar programs. Examples include public universities in states such as Texas, Florida, Kentucky, Arizona, and New York, to name a few.

The proliferation of these programs can be attributed, in part, to federal legislation aimed at addressing the plight of foster youth and

alumni in higher education. Legislation such as the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106–169), the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 (P.L. 107–133), and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110–351) have called attention to the need to assist foster youth and alumni in meeting their educational goals. However, these policy changes have done little to address the full spectrum of challenges facing collegiate foster youth and alumni (e.g., Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Okpych, 2012).

Recent legislation has called for more actionable steps to address some of the non-financial needs of individuals in and from foster care, and to expand these responsibilities beyond child welfare agencies, to college and universities. For instance, the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act of 2015 (S. 2267/H.R. 4043), which would amend the Higher Education Act of 1965, calls on academic institutions to account for providing more supports to foster youth and alumni. In essence, this legislative effort is designed to improve campus climate, well-being, and educational outcomes for those in and from foster care.

### 1.3. Components of existing academic support programs

As indicated, several institutions across the country have formed academic support programs for foster youth and alumni; there are common service components for these existing programs. In their examination of 10 collegiate support initiatives based in California and Washington, Dworsky and Perez (2010) found that most programs offer some type of financial assistance to youth participating in the program. These authors described these as “last dollar” scholarships that supplement other forms of financial aid (p. 257). Other common service elements for these types of programs include peer and other forms of mentorship and career consultation/counseling (see Seita Scholars - <https://wmich.edu/fosteringssuccess/seita/scholars>), primary/secondary academic advising and break housing (see Embrace Initiative - <http://www.uky.edu/academy/UK-EMBRACE>) and general case management services (see Transition to Independence Program - <http://www.tipwaynestate.org>), among others.

### 1.4. Challenges associated with academic support programs

As with any academic endeavor, developing and implementing support programs for collegiate foster youth is not without challenges. For example, many post-secondary institutions are not familiar with the unique needs of foster youth and alumni, and, thus, are not able to address the needs of this population (Emerson, 2006). This dynamic may create dissonance between the needs of youth and what academic support programs actually offer (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). Additionally, these programs can be difficult to manage and sustain, given the complexity of involving multiple systems (e.g., child welfare, education, college/university departments, etc.) (e.g., Ajinkya et al., 2015; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Other challenges include financial sustainability, identifying individuals who qualify for these programs, and explicating measureable outcomes associated with program participation (e.g., Dworsky & Perez, 2009).

Perhaps at the core of these challenges, is the absence of conceptual models for the planning, implementing, and evaluation of these programs (e.g., Watt et al., 2013). Collins (2015) explained that this conceptualization of foster care programming, to include evaluation, is a “critical and often overlooked task” (p. 161). Specifically, conceptual models that integrate the lived experience of foster youth and alumni are needed (e.g., Salazar, Jones, Emerson, & Mucha, 2016). However, because these programs can vary widely in form and function (e.g., Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), explicating broad-based models for these programs has been difficult. Further, foster youth and alumni are seldom involved in program planning endeavors (Miller & Owens, 2015). Thus, these academic support programs are often developed by

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