Professional and youth perspectives on higher education-focused interventions for youth transitioning from foster care

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ABSTRACT

Youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood access and succeed in college at much lower rates than the general population. A variety of services exist to support youth with their postsecondary goals, but few if any have evidence for their effectiveness. As part of a National Institute on Drug Abuse-funded intervention development project to design Fostering Higher Education, a structured, testable postsecondary access and retention intervention for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood, focus groups were conducted with community stakeholders to collect recommendations for how to most effectively structure the intervention. Analyses of focus group findings resulted in four theme groups: (1) general recommendations for intervention development; (2) recommendations for an educational advocacy intervention component; (3) recommendations for a mentoring intervention component; and (4) recommendations for a substance abuse prevention intervention component. These themes offered a variety of important insights for developing interventions in a way that is usable for youth and feasible for communities to implement.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

For the majority of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood, achieving higher education is a goal toward which they aspire (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Reilly, 2003). However, reaching this goal can be quite complicated for this population for a variety of reasons, some of which include not graduating from high school, lack of supportive adults and encouragement to pursue higher education, insufficient financial resources and housing, alcohol and substance abuse, lack of postsecondary and independent living preparation, physical and mental health challenges, lack of connection with resources and services, lack of support with academics and school/career planning, becoming a parent, and lack of campus involvement (Batsche et al., 2014; Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Courtney et al., 2004, 2007; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Graham, Schellinger, & Vaughn, 2015; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Salazar, 2013; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). These challenges result in substantially lower postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion rates for foster care alumni compared to youth in the general population, as well as low-income, first-generation students (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Davis, 2006; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Pecora, Kesler, et al., 2006; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora, Williams, et al., 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Wolanin, 2005).

A variety of supports and programs exist to help mitigate the postsecondary challenges that youth transitioning from foster care face. For example, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, P.L. 106–169, 113 Stat. 1882, 1999) provides federal funding to states to provide transition planning and preparation services, primarily in the form of independent living programs (ILPs). Many ILPs offer postsecondary preparation services such as support filling out college admission and financial aid applications. In addition, many college campuses across the country are developing campus support programs specifically for youth with foster care experience (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). However, there is very little evidence regarding what approaches are effective at improving postsecondary access and success for young people transitioning from care.

In an effort to address this, as part of a National Institute on Drug Abuse-funded intervention development project, we are developing the Fostering Higher Education intervention, a postsecondary access and retention intervention that is highly structured and evaluable (due to clearly articulated implementation guidelines and theory of change), and composed of intervention components that either already have an evidence base or hold promise for being particularly well-suited for this purpose due to their versatility and ability to address a host of

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challenges these youth may experience, in relation to both accessing and being successful in postsecondary education. The identified intervention components for inclusion in Fostering Higher Education are (1) professional educational advocacy, (2) mentoring, and (3) substance abuse prevention programming. The goal of the intervention development project is to create a program using these elements that (1) bridges and offers continuous support through the high school to college transition (programs typically focus on postsecondary access or retention, not both); (2) is applicable to all college-interested youth transitioning from foster care (rather than subpopulations); and (3) is easily integrated into current practice settings (such as foster care independent living programs, child welfare agencies, or local colleges and universities). However, in order to maximize the likelihood of successful adoption and implementation of this intervention approach by youth-serving organizations, it is crucial to ensure that youth and practitioners buy into and perceive as useful the intervention approach developed through this project. According to research on evidence-based practice, "stakeholder involvement in the research or evaluation process is likely to enhance dissemination" (Brownson, Colditz, & Proctor, 2012, p. 1693). Thus, community stakeholders were asked about the perceived utility of these intervention elements, as well as how they might be developed and delivered to maximize their effectiveness. The current study summarizes findings from community stakeholder focus groups to answer these questions.

1.2. Intervention elements

While there are currently no evidence-based interventions for improving postsecondary access and retention for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood, there are a variety of intervention elements that offer promise for informing the development of a comprehensive intervention approach. The three identified intervention approaches—educational advocacy, mentoring, and alcohol and substance abuse prevention programming—have been used in a variety of forms and capacities to support the educational goals of youth in foster care and other vulnerable and at-risk populations. They are also quite versatile in terms of program structure possibilities and are able to address a host of challenges that youth may experience in relation to both accessing and participating in higher education. For example, educational advocacy can be used to address a wide variety of logistical challenges related to achieving educational goals and can be implemented through volunteers or professionals, while mentoring can be implemented in a wide variety of ways to provide both emotional and instrumental support for achieving a variety of goals and can be implemented one-on-one, in groups, by peers, by community members, or in a host of other forms. Due to the postsecondary focus of the intervention, substance abuse prevention is also highly valuable as this is a serious risk factor for all college-attending youth. A summary of each of these intervention components, its applicable evidence base (if any), and example implementations of each that may be useful for informing the design of Fostering Higher Education, can be found in the following sections.

1.2.1. Professional educational advocacy

Educational advocacy (EA) is a popular educational support approach used with youth in care in many locations across the United States (e.g., Advocates for Children of New York, 2005; Pennucci, 2010; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). EA responsibilities often include resolving complex barriers to educational success such as transfer or enrollment problems, educational consultation, and securing needed educational accommodations and supports for youth in foster care. Common goals of EA programs include improving access to services, maintaining enrollment, improving attendance, making academic progress, and reducing school disciplinary incidents (Pennucci, 2010). A variety of different EA program models have been developed for use with youth in foster care. For example, Treehouse for Kids, a

Washington State nonprofit, offers an educational advocacy program implemented by trained education specialists to provide direct advocacy, consultation, and referral services to help students resolve complex K-12 education-related challenges (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2010). Treehouse also established Graduation Success to improve high school graduation rates using student-centered planning and student-engagement mentoring based on the Check and Connect model (which aims to enhance students' school engagement though relationship building, monitoring, and problem solving); this program is also implemented by trained educational specialists (Treehouse, n.d.; University of Minnesota, 2015). EA services can also be delivered through volunteers. For example, the FosterEd program partners with local agencies and helps youth identify supportive adults in their life to form the youth's education team. Team members are trained and coached by a FosterEd education liaison and work collaboratively to help the youth identify and achieve their academic goals (FosterEd, n.d.). EA services can also be provided through legal professionals. For example, the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) assigns an education consultant and attorney to each state region to ensure that students are receiving appropriate education services (Moses, Potts, & Morgan, 2006; State of Tennessee Department of Children's Services, n.d.). While no known randomized, experimental tests of the effects of EA have been conducted, programs have tentative findings suggesting a variety of positive impacts, including fewer school absences, less school mobility, improved high school graduation rates, increased educational support-related knowledge of social workers, and successful resolution of education-related challenges (Advocates for Children of New York, 2005; Burley, 2011, 2012; Zetlin et al., 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

1.2.2. Mentoring

Mentoring is another popular approach to providing support to youth. Studies have found mentoring relationships to have positive impacts for youth with foster care experience (e.g., Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Ahrens et al., 2011; Crisp, 2010; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999). For youth in foster care, natural mentoring can be a particularly beneficial mentoring approach. A recent systematic review of studies assessing natural mentoring with older foster youth (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016) found positive associations between natural mentoring and positive psychosocial and academic outcomes.

Some mentoring programs have been developed specifically to support youth with foster care experience who are pursuing or attending a postsecondary program. For example, the Transition to Independence Program at Wayne State University matches incoming students who are alumni of foster care with upper level undergraduate peer mentors. When mentees become juniors they are eligible to apply to become peer mentors for the next cohort of underclassmen in the program. Preliminary findings from this program have found reduced student dropout rates as the program has matured (Wayne State University, 2016).

For foster youth with serious mental health challenges who have not yet completed the postsecondary application or enrollment process, the Better Futures near-peer coaching/mentoring program (Geenen et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2015) has been found to improve students' postsecondary preparation and access outcomes. It uses an adaptation of the Take Charge model, a self-determination intervention developed for high-risk youth to improve student engagement (Geenen et al., 2015; Powers et al., 2001). Students enrolled in Better Futures receive support through one-on-one near-peer coaching, mentoring workshops, and by connecting with experienced alumni of foster care. Results from a randomized field test found that Better Futures participants were significantly more likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary program, report higher self-determination, and report greater mental health improvements compared to a control group (Geenen et al., 2015).