



Perceived value of a campus-based college support program by students who aged out of foster care



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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to evaluate core components of one college support program at a midwest university from the perspective of student users who have aged out of foster care and to assess the perception of these supports in the context of the program's college graduation rate. Ninety-five students enrolled in the program completed a 44-question survey to evaluate the program's services. Student perceived value of these services is presented along with graduation rates for students from the program. The findings confirm the importance of financial aid, housing, and adult guidance for this population in successfully graduating from college. While the 30% graduation rate for students from the program far exceeds the national average for degree completion of students with a background in foster care, it is below the rate for a comparable first-generation student population at the university. We conclude that while key components of a college support program like financial aid, housing, and trained adult staff guidance are necessary in supporting students with a background in foster care attain postsecondary success, they are not sufficient to adequately explain graduation rates.

1. Introduction

There were 427,910 children living in a foster care placement in the United States as of June 2016 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Often having been removed from biological parents due to physical and/or emotional abuse or neglect, children in foster care face a myriad of challenges. One particular area of challenge is that youth and young adults with foster care histories have higher rates of educational disadvantages and poorer educational outcomes when compared to similar age groups in the general population (Pecora, 2012; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). The effort to support young people in foster care to pursue postsecondary education was formalized into policy with the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which specifically addresses challenges faced by youth emancipating from foster care and the barriers they face entering their emerging adult years after case closure (Dworsky, Smithgall, & Courtney, 2014).

While postsecondary education is a desire of many youth from foster care, the achievement outcomes are dismal (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Reilly, 2003; Jones, 2010). Studies reveal

that these youth experience significant educational disadvantages, with only half of youth in foster care completing high school and < 20% taking any college-prep classes (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Wolanin, 2005; Pecora et al., 2005; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Sheehy et al., 2000). Students in foster care score 15 to 20 percentile points below others in statewide-standardized tests (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006; Beisse, Atkins, Scantlen, & Tyre, 2011; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Additionally, < 20% of foster children who qualify for college actually attend versus 32% of at-risk students with the same intellectual ability but who never lived in foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003). It is estimated that only 3–11% of individuals from foster care complete a bachelor's degree (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005; Emerson, 2006). In comparison, U.S. census data indicate college attendance for all individuals between 16 and 24-years-old is between 60 and 70% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) with approximately 33% of 25 to 34-year-olds in the general population holding a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

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1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Barriers to higher education for youth in foster care

Research has concluded that youth placed in foster care face significant barriers in obtaining a college education. While recent studies have added to the understanding of the obstacles these youth face, much of the information comes from studies that are at least seven years old. One major obstacle is poor academic preparedness, which may be linked to the fact that youth living in foster care change schools at higher rates than their non-foster peers and these more frequent changes are linked to lower academic performance (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). McKellar and Cowan (2011) found that students lose four to six months of academic progress every time there is a switch in schools primarily as the result of adjustment issues and delays in record transfers and assessment for special services. Additionally, teenagers in foster care have a higher enrollment in special-education classes than non-foster care youth (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006), and are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or need to repeat a grade (Educational Outcomes, 2007; Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2004). The combination of these challenges begins to explain why students with a background in foster care tend to score below their peers on standardized academic measures and are significantly less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a college degree.

But academic factors are not the only barriers to higher education. Dworsky and Perez (2010) identified financial aid, housing, and a sense of belonging as supports students with a background in foster care need to be successful in college. Similarly, Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap (2010) identified lack of financial resources, the need to have a full-time job, lack of transportation, and parenting responsibilities as key obstacles to former foster youth being successful in college. Other studies have looked at mental health challenges and life skills deficiencies as factors impeding former foster youth in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Youth with a background in foster care have been shown to have higher incidences of mental health challenges and a greater propensity for emotional and behavioral challenges (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; McMillen et al., 2005). Kyles, Unrau, and Root (2016) reported that college students with foster care histories perceive themselves to have greater struggles with mental health stressors compared to their peers; and, they attribute these struggles in part to their experiences in foster care. This population also struggles to secure necessary supports and skills to assume responsibilities in adulthood. For example, it is estimated that by the age of 18, about two-thirds of young people from foster care do not have basic resources such as a driver's license or money for necessities (Pecora et al., 2006). During these emerging adulthood years, young people from foster care are more likely than their non-foster peers to struggle with establishing secure growth in areas of finances, employment, housing, physical and mental health, relationships, and identity (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). These practical and systemic obstacles provide additional insight into why foster youth are less likely than their peers to enroll and succeed in college.

1.1.2. Support for foster youth attending college

In response to the barriers to postsecondary education faced by youth from foster care, Congress established the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program in 2001 as an amendment to the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. The ETV Program makes vouchers of up to \$5000 per year available to young adults coming from foster care for costs to attend institutions of higher education. In addition to federal ETV funds that youth from foster care are eligible to receive to help pay for college tuition, many states also provide financial assistance through state-specific programs.

A recent study found that students from foster care enrolled in a four-year university are more likely to drop out of school than similar low-income first-generation students who have never lived in foster

care (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). Davis (2006) noted that financial support alone is not adequate to meet the needs of college students from foster care; and, Emerson (2006) stressed the importance of campus programs to provide students with academic and social supports (see also, Casey Family Programs, 2010). Dworsky and Perez (2010) gathered data from a nonrandom sample of 98 college students supported by a campus program for former foster youth in Washington and California and identified key supports students valued in a campus support program. While students identified financial aid and housing assistance to be extremely important, this study also found that students placed a high value on adult guidance, whether in the form of academic advice on course selections and choosing a major, or mentoring support. This study concluded that a key component of campus support programs for students from foster care was the sense of belonging these programs provide; students were more likely to focus on the importance of support programs providing a sense of family than to focus on the financial assistance of these programs.

Research conducted with students from foster care at two community colleges in California reported similar findings (Cantú, 2013). These students reported that having a program on campus that focuses on their unique challenges was important in their ability to meet their educational goals. Students felt more connected because of their involvement in a program that understood and addressed their needs. This combination of high receptivity to student support services along with high academic motivation was also found to be linked to awareness of lack of family support among college students from foster care (Unrau et al., 2012). While college students from foster care face many foster-care related barriers in common, existing campus-based programs vary widely in scope, staffing and services; and, there is a need for more detailed program descriptions (Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016).

1.2. Purpose

As the number of college support programs for degree-seeking students with a background in foster care has grown (Salazar, 2012), the question arises as to the nature and efficacy of these programs. Salazar and her colleagues focused on the lack of clearly articulated and evidence-based postsecondary support approaches for youth with a background in foster care and proposed a theoretical intervention approach (Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016a; Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016c). Other researchers, including Dworsky and Perez (2010), Geiger et al. (2016), and Hernandez and Naccarato (2010), have stressed the need to assess the impact of current campus support programs on graduation rates. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate core components of one college support program from the perspective of student users who have aged out of foster care and assess the impact of these supports on graduation rates. Two main research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. What is the perceived importance of a campus based program, as well as specific program components, designed to support college students who aged out of foster care by its student users?
2. How do point-in-time perceptions of student users about the program align with graduation rates over time?

1.2.1. Campus-based program

The above research questions are addressed in this study by focusing on one campus-based program that was created when, Western Michigan University, a large Midwestern university responded to the challenge of researching, learning, and serving students from foster care through the establishment of its Seita Scholars program¹ in 2008. The

¹ The program name honors Dr. John Seita, a former foster care youth, a three-time Western Michigan University alumnus and a national advocate for children in foster care.

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