



# A descriptive analysis of programs serving foster care alumni in higher education: Challenges and opportunities

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## A B S T R A C T

Foster care alumni experience a number of challenges related to accessing and completing postsecondary education, however little is known about the programs that currently exist in the United States that support this group of students in college. This study sought to build on previous work that calls for the need to develop programs to support foster care alumni in higher education and to obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of existing programs and the perceived programmatic and student challenges as reported by program directors and staff, faculty, and researchers. Eight-one program directors, staff, and researchers in 22 states participated in an online survey about their perceptions of challenges related to programs supporting foster care alumni in college and challenges students experienced. The survey also elicited information about program and student characteristics. Results indicate several challenges related to financial support, student engagement, student housing, and helping students manage family and personal issues. This information created the foundation for a discussion about implications for future research, programs, practice, and policy related to foster care alumni in higher education.

Foster care alumni experience a number of educational challenges, particularly as it relates to accessing and completing postsecondary education and training (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2003). Research has shown that youth who have experienced foster care in the U.S. are less likely to complete high school (Wolanin, 2005), and to enroll in, and complete a postsecondary degree than their same age peers (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2010; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2003). In the past decade, child welfare agencies and postsecondary educational institutions have increasingly acknowledged these disparities and federal and state policies and programs have been implemented to encourage and support foster care alumni to continue their educational pursuits (Benedetto, 2008; Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Day, Edwards, Pickover, & Leever, 2013; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016; Okpych, 2012). However, there is a lack of research related to the characteristics and challenges of programs supporting foster care alumni in postsecondary settings and a lack of knowledge about the students and their experiences involved in these programs from the perspective of those working with them.

## 1. Barriers and successes of foster care alumni in higher education

Studies have shown that an estimated 70% of foster care youth aspire to obtain postsecondary educational credentials, but a much smaller proportion enroll and complete such programs (Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2011; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2003). Although national statistics are unavailable as to how many former foster youth enroll, persist, and graduate from postsecondary programs, a number of studies have identified factors related to the educational barriers and successes of foster care alumni in higher educational settings (Barnow et al., 2015; Day et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Geiger & Beltran, 2017a; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Jones, 2010, 2011; Lovitt & Emerson, 2008; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Okpych, Courtney, & Charles, 2015; Okumu, 2014; Pecora, 2012; Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010; Salazar, 2012, 2013). For example, many foster care alumni in college have been shown to be less prepared academically and experience less support and guidance than their peers, resulting in poorer outcomes (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2002; Merdinger et al., 2005). Many foster care alumni struggle

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financially while enrolled (Day et al., 2011; Merdinger et al., 2005; Salazar, 2012), have difficulty finding safe and stable housing (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), experience instability in relationships (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010), and may struggle with past trauma (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013).

## 2. Programs supporting foster care alumni in higher educational settings

In response to greater awareness about the unique needs and potential difficulties of foster care alumni in postsecondary educational settings, programs have emerged in the United States (U.S.) to better recruit and retain foster care alumni on college campuses. These programs recruit, prepare, and support foster care alumni in higher education settings, however there is limited knowledge about the size, location, services, and administration of the programs collectively. Little information is publicized and written about such programs in the academic literature (Geiger & Beltran, 2017b; Randolph & Thompson, 2017). As a result, there is still much to be discovered with regard to program characteristics, and the strengths and opportunities that practitioners and students involved in such programs experience.

Several well-known programs and state institutions have been successful in recruiting and engaging students in higher education programs, such as Arizona State University's Bridging Success Program (ASU Bridging Success, 2017; Geiger et al., 2016), the Guardian Scholars Program in California, Michigan State University's FAME Program (Michigan State University School of Social Work, FAME, 2016), Western Michigan University's Seita Scholars Program (Seita Scholars Program, 2017), Texas State University's FACES program (Watt et al., 2013), and the University of Washington's Champions Program (University of Washington, 2017). These are some examples of established programs in the U.S., however few programs publish findings regarding program outcomes. Programs continue to be developed to address the needs of foster care alumni on college campuses, so there is a need to better understand the challenges and successes programs and students experience have already encountered to provide insight to current and new program leaders.

Few studies exist that describe the outcomes of select programs targeting foster care alumni (Geenen et al., 2015; Geiger & Beltran, 2017b; Watt et al., 2013) and some research that describes student success and experiences exists (Geiger & Beltran, 2017a), however, there is little research that comprehensively examines programs across the country in an attempt to inform and improve the development of campus-based support programs. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the characteristics of a sample of programs supporting foster care alumni in U.S. postsecondary settings, their programs and services, and to examine the student and programmatic challenges identified by program directors, staff, and researchers.

## 3. Research questions

This study aimed to address three research questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of campus-based programs serving foster care alumni in the U.S.?
- (2) What are the services and supports offered to foster care alumni by campus-based programs?
- (3) What are the perceived student challenges and programmatic challenges of campus-based programs serving foster care alumni?

## 4. Methods

To compile a list of potential participants, an online state-by-state and within state search was conducted to identify on-campus support programs for youth who have experienced foster care. Then, a search of

publications (peer-reviewed, white papers, reports) of a combination of the keywords, “foster care youth”, “foster care alumni”, “foster youth”, “aging out” and “college/university”, “post-secondary education”, “higher education”, and “scholarship” was conducted and authors' names and contact information were captured. A list of 296 researchers and practitioners who were associated with campus programs or publications related to foster care alumni and higher education was compiled via these online searches.

After permission was granted by the first author's university institutional review board, these contacts were invited to participate in an online confidential survey about their experiences and perspectives related to programs serving foster care alumni in higher education. Participants answered questions about their role with the campus support program, details about the program and institution where the program was located, as well as the perceived challenges and strengths associated with the program and with student experiences. Participants were asked the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements on a Likert-type scale, regarding student challenges and programmatic challenges. The survey was open from May 2, 2016 to June 9, 2016 and consisted of 45 closed- and open-ended questions. Two reminder emails were sent during this time frame.

### 4.1. Sample description

Of the 296 contacts, 24 emails were returned as undeliverable or no longer active. Eighty-one individuals completed the survey, indicating a 30% response rate. To obtain a variety of perspectives, multiple individuals involved with a program were invited to participate in the survey. The majority of survey respondents were program managers/directors ( $n = 37$ , 46%) or program staff ( $n = 20$ , 35%) at institutions with a program supporting foster care alumni. Eighteen percent ( $n = 14$ ) were grant principal investigators for programs, faculty, and researchers. To ensure confidentiality, participants were not asked the name of their program or institution. Further information about the sample is presented in Table 1.

### 4.2. Measurement

#### 4.2.1. Institutional, student, and program-specific characteristics

The survey asked study participants about several institutional characteristics, student characteristics, and details about services related to the program with which they were affiliated. Institutional characteristics included size (student enrollment); setting (urban, suburban, rural); programs offered by institution (undergraduate, graduate, etc.); private or public; and 2 or 4-year institution. Questions about program characteristics were related to relationships with community agencies; presence of a board/council; types of services and support offered; referral process; inclusion criteria for the program; and availability of tuition waivers. Questions about student characteristics included average age, gender, and total number of students with a history of foster care served, as well as funding/financial support sources available to students.

#### 4.2.2. Perceived institutional challenges

Participants were asked the degree to which they agreed or disagreed on a Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”) that their program experienced eight challenges related to support from institution administration and others, financial support of the program, program delivery, student recruitment, student engagement, staff-related issues, marketing, and evaluation. An ‘other’ option was also provided where respondents were able to elaborate or provide another option.

#### 4.2.3. Perceived student challenges

On a similar Likert-type scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”, participants were asked the degree to which they

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