AT ISSUE

Serving the Underserved: A Focus on the Foster Care Population

Credits

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Introduction

As open-door institutions, community colleges find themselves serving a wide array of student learners (Mullin, 2012). Embedded within this population are students ill-equipped to travel this foreign terrain. Arguably, one of the most vulnerable of these subsections consists of students who are former foster care youth (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Foster care youth are students who have aged out of the foster care system, have left the foster care system prior to reaching the age of majority, or are still receiving some sort of foster care support (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Like many other youth leaving high school, foster youth have similar aspirations for obtaining a post-secondary degree. Unfortunately, their success rates are significantly impaired due to lack of support systems, inadequate academic preparation, extreme financial challenges, and weakened skills needed to move beyond barriers (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

This At Issue explores the specific challenges facing foster youth and the opportunities available for community colleges to better serve these students. Special attention is given to states and colleges leading the way in serving foster youth, along with suggestions for future research. As higher education professionals, we all understand the importance of working to make a difference in our students' lives. Ultimately, it is the hope of this At Issue to not only highlight one of the most vulnerable and underserved populations of students attending college today, but to act as a call to action for leaders within the higher education system to strengthen and enhance the support services available to ALL at-risk students.

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Doctorate in Community College Leadership

Foster Care Facts

31-45% of foster youth enroll in college (compared to the national enrollment rate of 59.2%)

442,995 children who were in the foster youth system in 2017

70% of foster youth who pursue higher education attend community colleges

21,594 foster youth ages 18 and older who exited the system in 2017

3-10% of foster youth complete a bachelor's degree

80% of foster youth aspire to attend college

SOURCE: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018

Characteristics

Although foster students present their own unique experiences and attributes, they share general qualities. In addition, they also display many characteristics of other underserved student populations. They possess a fundamentally different experience because they do not have parental involvement (Whitman, 2018). Children learn adult skills that help them act independently by imitating their parents, which many foster youth lack (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Further, foster youth are likely to be without academic capital, as they do not have knowledge of education and career options or the supports that help them navigate educational systems (Whitman, 2018; Wolanin, 2005). Colleges expect students to function independently, yet many foster youth do not have opportunities to become independent through the development of self-advocacy, social, organizational, and communication skills (Wolanin, 2005).

Many foster youth have not experienced educational success at the K-12 level due to the instability of the foster care system and past trauma (Opsal & Eman, 2018). The longer students are in the foster care system, the less they tend to feel prepared for college and the less they feel supported during the transition to college (Franco & Durdella, 2018). Foster youth may encounter high school teachers, administrators, and/or social workers who fail to serve as guides during the college selection and application processes. One study found that 50% of foster youth respondents indicated social workers were not actively involved in their educational planning, including failing to

provide them with information on educational benefits available when they turned 18 years old, such as college tuition waivers for foster care alumni (Rios & Rocco, 2014).

Connections are critical for foster youth because a relationship with a resourceful and empathetic adult is a key factor in promoting college success (Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Whitman, 2018). Yet, foster youth may resist seeking help due to their experiences with intense loss or trauma. They may take a self-protective stance towards relationships through avoidant attachment, which occurs when an individual becomes emotionally guarded and is reluctant to depend on someone else for support. Foster youth often have difficulty asking for help and support as they choose to avoid intimacy and emotional closeness to minimize their dependence on others. Foster alumni with higher levels of avoidant attachment are less likely to earn a college degree, probably because they encountered challenges when facing issues beyond their own resources and capacity (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Lack of Support Systems

First generation students often feel alone, afraid, and frustrated by the new world of college; however, the challenges for foster youth are even more significant. Sadly, only 20% of graduating high school teens who have been in foster care make it to college (Staff & Sherry, 2018, para. 3). The majority of foster youth come from poor, at-risk backgrounds, often abused, neglected, abandoned, and medically and/or emotionally fragile (ENNIS Center for Children Inc, 2018). They

Former Foster Care Student Says College Has Helped Her Live Her Dreams

To protect this student's identity, we shall use the initials M.W. The student is currently in her early twenties. When M.W. was five, she and her siblings were removed from their heroin-addicted mother. For most of M.W.'s life, she lived in Alabama, where her aunt cared for her and seven other children. The student reflects on her challenging life in foster care and shares her story saying,

"I don't regret anything I went through. It has made me the person I am today."

M.W., who says she has earned a 3.3 GPA, knows she's eligible for free tuition, but has not asked for such provisions. She feels that would be taking advantage of the system. "I feel like people use it as a crutch," she stated. When told about the free services her school offers, including therapy and even free tuition, she admitted not knowing about the therapy, nor even who is her academic counselor.

M.W. says her experience with her adoptive mom, who was her biological dad's sister, was a nightmare that never ended. But her life wasn't a lot better before being adopted. Her biological mom was on and off drugs, her father was absent most of the time, and as she remembered, he also forced her mom into prostitution. She lived with her adoptive mom until she was 18. That's when she began to see a better life, and yet she can still recall the horrors that plagued her just a year earlier.

Speaking in a hushed tone, M.W. remembered a time between ages 8 and 16 when she was habitually molested by a family member. She said her adoptive mom knew, but did little about it. At the time, M.W. knew what was happening to her was wrong, but she felt trapped and couldn't free herself. "I told him 'No' and 'stop,' but at some point, I just felt helpless. And, at some point, I felt that was the only love I would get." M.W. said the man who molested her is still free today, and that she has forgiven him and her aunt who threatened her not to say anything.

M.W. also recalled memories of witnessing the physical abuse of her siblings. She talked about her brother and younger sister, who are both disabled with cerebral palsy, a condition brought about because of her mother's addiction to heroin while being pregnant with her siblings. M.W. doesn't communicate often with her mom and dad, and doesn't blame them for what happened. "My mother was raped too," she pointed out. "It's an ongoing cycle. That's why I'm so against what happens in this house stays in this house."

Today, M.W. is in a healthy and happy relationship. "I never felt like I was part of a home until I moved out. I'm with my fiance. She actually made a home for me." M.W. says she feels her life is on track and plans on graduating with a degree in medical office administration. She isn't going to stop there, either, having every intention of returning to earn another degree in nursing. "I'm a natural caregiver," she said. "I will make sure everybody else is okay before myself."

Like many foster care students, M.W. demonstrates a lack of knowledge of her available resources, combined with a strong determination to succeed.

commonly lack support systems which may be considered basic or automatic for many students. Likewise, student services personnel are often unfamiliar with the challenges faced by youth in foster care and are not prepared to address their unique needs (Dworsky, 2017, para. 5).

A review of the path to college for foster youth uncovers a staggering number of hurdles. Author and former foster youth, Shenandoah Chefalo, put herself into foster care at age 13 to escape her abusive parents, and ultimately was moved 50 times, attending 35 schools before finally graduating from high school (Chefalo, 2018). This experience is common for foster youth and demonstrates the deficiency in support to help make college possible. Another foster youth, Robert Flippo, shared his perspective about the lack of support stating, "Universities

and colleges are scary because it's just more schooling, but it's harder – with no help. Just being able to provide more support and mentorship in getting over the fear is a lot" (Staff & Sherry, 2018, para. 19).

Colleges are not commonly structured to handle the unique challenges faced by the nearly 400,000 foster youth across the United States on any given day (Chefalo, 2018). Of this number, nearly 25,000 young adults age out of foster care each year and become potential college students (Dworsky, 2017).

Academic Preparedness

Many foster youth are academically underprepared because of the systems they must navigate, including social services, education, and social support systems. They often spend their early years dealing with transient living conditions. Studies have revealed that foster youth can experience five or more school changes while completing their K-12 education, with almost half experiencing more than three home placements (Pecora, 2012). This makes it difficult for students to find time to study, prepare for school, and to attain and retain knowledge and skills. When students move to a new school, often the school may not recognize or accept courses from previous schools, or the students' records do not come with the them, setting them further behind (Denkmann, 2017; Hayes Piel, 2018). Foster youth placed in new homes during the school year may experience delayed enrollment due to lost or misplaced records, often resulting in many high school students failing to earn enough credits to graduate (Herlocker, 2006; Pecora, 2012).

Schools may automatically place foster youth on a basic education track and refuse to consider them for honors or Advanced Placement (AP) tracks (Dworsky, 2018), even when their test scores and grades indicate they are capable of advanced course work (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013). Foster youth recognize when the tracks they are placed on lack the rigor to prepare them for college (Hayes Piel, 2018). Further, high school instructors and administrators do not always understand the needs or challenges impacting foster youth and/or simply may not recognize their status (Hayes Piel, 2018). As a result, foster youth are expected to act and perform the same as all students, despite unique needs which may require additional support for them to be successful. A major factor in determining the college readiness of foster youth is self-efficacy (Williams Gavin, Baker, & Williams-Devane, 2018). Self-efficacy is an individual's self-perception that he/she can achieve a goal. Someone with low self-efficacy will be more likely to give up and less likely to succeed. Foster youth who are supported along their primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational journey by caseworkers, family, placements, friends, educators, and student services staff will develop the skills and capabilities to grow into independent college-bound adults (Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

Foster youth identified caring and helpful teachers, counselors, and caseworkers as those who supported their postsecondary education aspirations and helped to prepare them for college (Rios and Rocco, 2014).

Many foster youth do not have the support systems in place at home or at school to motivate and encourage them to pursue higher education. Students noted that caseworkers and high school counselors do not actively engage them in discussions about postsecondary credentials and the tuition assistance and resources available to them (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018). Caseworkers and counselors may not know or understand the process of postsecondary options, or may assume these students have academic deficits and therefore, do not acknowledge their potential for postsecondary education (Hayes Piel, 2018; Stansberry Beard & Gavin II, 2018).

Caseworkers indicated that their primary role is to keep youth safe. However, Roller White, O'Brien, Pecora, and Buhler (2015) contend that the role of the caseworker must include preparing students for adult living and assisting foster youth with navigating the medical health care, mental health care, education, and justice systems. With the sole focus on safety, they do not have the supports in place to help these youth live independently, learn how to manage their time, and use appropriate study skills to be successful in college (Hayes Piel, 2018).

College support staff are not familiar with, or prepared to address foster care youth needs, making it difficult for these students to establish relationships critical to their success in college (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013). Due to their home and educational instability, foster youth find it challenging to seek support because they attempt to protect themselves from being let down and hurt when they rely on someone. This avoidant attachment will ultimately impact their college persistence and completion (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

The lower academic performance of foster care youth can also be linked to the maltreatment they have experienced, which may delay them developmentally (Hayes Piel, 2018). This mistreatment, along with social deprivation due to home and educational instability (Conti & Heckman, 2013), can lead to emotional and behavioral problems that affect physical and mental health and can lead to high-risk behaviors. Foster youth often suffer from substance dependence and mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, general anxiety disorders, and depression at higher rates than the general population (Roller White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buhler, 2015; Salazar, 2013). In the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth study (Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G. R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., & Keller, T., 2007), 73.8% of foster care youth reported at least one mental health issue in their lifetimes as compared to 48.8% of non-foster care youth, and 50.7% reported at least one mental health issue in the last year, compared to 36.3% of non-foster care youth. In high school, emotional and behavioral problems can lead to suspension or expulsion, setting students further behind in their college readiness and preparation (Rios & Ricco, 2014). With mental health issues, adjusting to school becomes challenging (Herlocker, 2006), and pursuing higher education seems insurmountable (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018).

Prior circumstances can impact the reading, writing, and math skills of foster youth (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018), which is apparent on academic achievement test scores and in the number of foster youth who earn a high school equivalency certificate. Fifty percent of foster care youth earn a high school equivalency certificate (Whitman, 2018) instead of a high school diploma. Compared to other foster youth, those who earn a high school diploma are more likely to complete a college degree and have greater economic success later in life (Pecora, 2012; Roller White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buhler, 2015). Foster care youth also perform 15-20% lower on academic achievement tests

than non-foster care youth (Herlocker, 2006). At the age of 17, 51.3% of foster care youth read below the ninth-grade level (Okpych, 2015). Their academic under-preparedness leading up to postsecondary education results in many foster care youth placing into remedial math and English classes (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018; Hayes Piel, 2018). Gaps between high school and college to earn money and take care of children further challenge the retention of math and writing skills, leading to remedial education (Dworksky, 2018). Students who place into remedial education are more likely to drop out of classes and less likely to earn a college degree (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013).

An Administrator's Story on Foster Care: A Profile of Dr. Bob Bade of Pasco-Hernando State College

Dr. Bob Bade began working at the Tampa Bay-area Pasco-Hernando State College in 1990. In that time he has known hundreds of students. As Vice-President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, his chief job is knowing who attends the nearly 12,000-student enrolled four-year college.

We have Get Acquainted Day," Bade said. "While we don't have any specific programs that support foster care students, we acknowledge we really can't because they already feel out of place. We really work covertly."

According to the Pasco-Hernando State College's website, Get Acquainted Day serves to introduce the college and its resources to incoming freshmen. Bade said in many ways students who arrive from a foster care home or system possess the same concerns and interests as any other incoming student, and so they receive the full array of experiences and opportunities as other traditional newcomers. However, he recognizes that it is important to be honest and acknowledge these students are different in other ways because of how they grew up and the lack of opportunities they may have had along the way.

"You've got some who succeed. They are going to outwork some students and, then again, there are others who will struggle." - Dr. Bob Bade

Unfortunately many will underachieve, but that's something Bade and other college officials are trying to change. According to the U.S. Department of Education's website, about 400,000 children and youth are in foster care at any given time. Roughly five percent of that national figure resides in Florida.

In 2013, the Sunshine State passed a statute that offered campus coaching at some institutions in an effort (according to the law) "to provide current and former foster care children and young adults with dedicated, on-campus support." According to the Orlando Sentinel, even with existing resources, foster youth are graduating from high school at a rate of 30-50% - and college graduation is even worse, with only 3% completing (Orlando Sentinel, 2018).

Bade's college works to help these students, providing them with private advice and services, because he's aware that beyond the financial and social pitfalls that all too often deprive foster care students, the other battle they face in graduating is thinking they can't do it in the first place. If foster care students are encouraged, advised on how college works, and mentored, then it is likely they can succeed. Bade believes that students who come from broken homes will inevitably struggle, but it is incumbent on him and other college leaders to open doors for these students who are inured to feeling left out.

"Especially at our level, we can make this crucial investment," he says. "Let's look at the return: they can be a doctor, lawyer, or police officer. For these kids to make it out of the system is enormous."

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Financial Issues

Transitioning from high school to college is never easy, nor is funding a college education. For former foster care students, the challenges are multiplied by barriers such as homelessness, food insecurity, lack of familial support systems, and scarce financial resources (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). Studies have found that financial difficulties, needing to work, and concerns about housing are among the barriers that prevent foster youth from pursuing postsecondary education (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014, p. 6). Obtaining a post-secondary degree strengthens a student's ability to remain employed and not revert to state-funded assistance (Fryar, Jordan, & DeVooght, 2017). Unfortunately, only three percent of students who are aging out or opting out of the foster care system receive a post-secondary degree by the time they reach age 25 (Fryar, Jordan, & DeVooght, 2017).

There are a few federal programs designed to assist foster care students in the funding of their educational endeavors. The most notable of these is the John H. Chaffe Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017), which is designed to assist students who have aged out of foster care, left foster care after the age of 16, or who have not yet aged out but appear to be on that path (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). The services provided generally focus on assisting the youth to develop independent living plans and to work with coordinators to oversee their progress (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017).

A second federal program is the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017), which was created in 2001 as a result of the Safe and Stable Families Amendment passed that same year (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). This program provides funding to students up to the age of 23 for education and training (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). Students qualifying for the ETV receive up to $5,000 in funding each academic year (Federal Student Aid, 2018).

Foster youth, like all students searching for financial funding for college, should complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA is the national application designed by the U.S. Department of Education to determine need (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Need is reviewed based on five general criteria: wages earned in a specific tax year, taxes paid, household size, the number of family members in college, and untaxed income. Based on these criteria, the FAFSA calculates the student's expected family contribution (EFC) for the academic year. The EFC represents how much the student could be expected to contribute toward college expenses, not what they must pay for their education. The lower the EFC, the greater the student's need (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

An equally important factor in determining a student's federal financial aid eligibility is his/her dependency status. On August 14, 2008, the U.S. Department of Education modified the definition of independent students to include students who 1) were currently in the foster care system, were wards of the court, or were orphans, and 2) students who were orphans, wards of the court, or students who were in the foster care system after

the age of 13 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This was significant because these students were previously required to submit parental information in order to qualify for federal aid. This distinction allowed foster youth to be regarded as independent students, thus enabling them to receive Title IV federal aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Foster youth who have provided documentation reflecting their status as current or former foster youth may qualify for federal grants, scholarships, work study, and loan funds to help support their post-secondary expenses (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Foster youth whose EFC is $0 qualify for a minimum of $6,095 for the 2018-19 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Specific challenges experienced by foster youth when transitioning from foster care to independent living include homelessness and food insecurity (Choca, et al., 2004). Studies highlighted by Choca have illustrated that a significant number of foster youth find themselves homeless at some point after leaving care. The data shows that 10% to 36% of former foster youth experienced homelessness for at least one day since leaving care (Choca, et al., 2004).

Likewise, Dworsky (2017) found that the nearly 25,000 students who have aged out of the foster care system each year are at tremendous risk for hunger, also noting that many of these students have no support systems in place to help them access and use resources that can assist with this and other basic needs (Dworsky, 2017). As a result, former foster care students have a hard time connecting with financial resources available to assist in paying for things like food, housing, books, and transportation (Dworsky, 2017).

ADDITIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS FOR FOSTER CARE STUDENTS:

- **Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, Inc.**
  Scholarship opportunities are available to students who have overcome tremendous challenges in their lives and continue to persevere.
  https://scholars.horatioalger.org/scholarships

- **International Student Foundation**
  Scholarships are designed for orphans or former foster care youth in their transition to college and require participation in mentor outreach activities to guarantee needed support. **http://isfsite.org/students/**

- **Foster Care to Success**
  Scholarships will provide assistance with the purchases of books and supplies to former foster care students. **https://www.fc2success.org/programs/scholarships-and-grants/**

Navigating Issues

Navigating higher education institutional requirements is a hurdle foster youth may face when pursuing a college education because many lack college readiness skills and college knowledge (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Many are not encouraged to apply to college, despite its importance to labor market success. Additionally, they may be unaware of college opportunities (Dworksy & Perez, 2010). If foster youth enroll in college, they may not know how to obtain student services or where to locate the services on campus (Merdinger, Hines, & Osterling, 2005). Other obstacles for this population include completing required paperwork to participate in campus support programs, securing transportation to get to class, and the complex process of transferring to a four-year institution. To provide services, colleges need to identify foster youth, which can be difficult. Students can self-identify, but they may fear being "outed" as foster youth (Miller, Benner, Kheibari & Washington, 2017). Institutions may use the FAFSA question that asks, "At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?" to identify foster youth students (Dworksy & Perez, 2010). However, there are challenges with FAFSA, as well as FERPA guidelines, which may prevent the college from sharing student contact information with foster youth program staff. This can make it difficult for the foster program to follow up with individual students if they do not have personal contact information (Cancino, 2018). For programs with limited slots, FAFSA data may not be available until after all of the slots are filled (Dworsky & Perez, 2010)

Though colleges offer support services, an additional challenge is that many foster youth may harbor a general distrust of adults, especially those who are perceived to be part of a bureaucracy (Herlocker, 2006), because numerous professionals have come and gone during the students' lives in the foster care system (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Also, other students may be hesitant to use foster care services because of the fear of being stigmatized (Miller, Benner, Kheibari & Washington, 2017; Wolanin, 2005).

While foster youth face the daunting challenge of navigating college systems, they must also learn to do the same for other systems to secure documentation for financial aid to obtain funding to attend college. Funding is available through multiple agencies, but each agency has its own unique application process and requirement, which can lead to confusion. For example, to receive a Pell grant a student needs to complete FAFSA, but to receive an ETV waiver, the student must go through another agency (Garman, 2018).

Foster youth who are unfamiliar with the higher education system need guidance about their post-secondary education options, including how to navigate the process of self-assessment in order to choose an appropriate post-secondary program, how to respond to acceptance letters, and how to complete the enrollment process (Casey Family Programs, 2006). Caseworkers, K-12 educators, and support staff need to be trained to help foster youth use available resources to assist them with college and financial aid applications (Piel, 2018). Colleges can provide outreach programming to help K-12 educators and social

workers relay this information to students. In addition to lacking information about college selection and financial aid, many college admissions processes are intimidating and antiquated (Herlocker, 2006). Each college has its own institutional and program requirements, and the application process differs from school to school. Foster youth may not have direct access to technology when college applications are required to be completed fully online. For example, if a student needs to scan and submit a document electronically, not having a scanner could prevent them from completing the application process (Cancino, 2018). Applying for financial aid is frequently cited as a barrier to student completion (Aging Out Institute, 2018; Dworksy & Perez, 2017; Herlocker, 2006). Students may need to use other financial resources to help cover the cost of childcare, housing, and textbooks (Cancino, 2018; Piel, 2018). Additionally, some foster youth who begin college may need to take a break from school and return later. The availability of advocates for students in these situations can be helpful for navigating an institution's readmission policy (Miller et al, 2017).

Leading the Change

Colleges nationwide are working to help more foster students enroll and succeed by creating support systems, as well as by implementing new programs to provide financial, academic, social/emotional, and logistical (e.g., housing) support (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). In addition, many states have launched targeted initiatives including Fostering Success Michigan, which helps teens and young adults who have been in foster care graduate from college and build successful careers (Staff & Sherry, 2018). Community colleges are also creating support systems and processes to help students from start to finish. As a part of an Ohio State University study, researcher Royel Johnson studied foster youth in Ohio and helped to launch a pre-college access program for students to experience college for a day. The program, which involves faculty, staff, and community leaders, exposes students to critical information and resources to assist with navigating their college-going decisions. Johnson found that removing the stigma of being labeled as a foster youth, as well as taking an interdisciplinary approach while working across sectors, were both critical factors in improving college access for foster youth (Carlson, 2018).

Community college leaders must work to create support systems in partnership with campus and community resources to best assist foster youth. Existing academic and support programs, such as TRIO and First Year Experiences, should be leveraged to address the multiple identities of foster care youth. These programs provide experiential, mentoring, and leadership opportunities that help students recognize, access, and develop supportive relationships which are critical to the success of foster care youth (Hayes Piel, 2018).

As a study by the University of the Pacific found, "Simply having a dedicated person whom foster youth can go to and ask questions–something many of these young people have never had–could really make a difference to their college success"
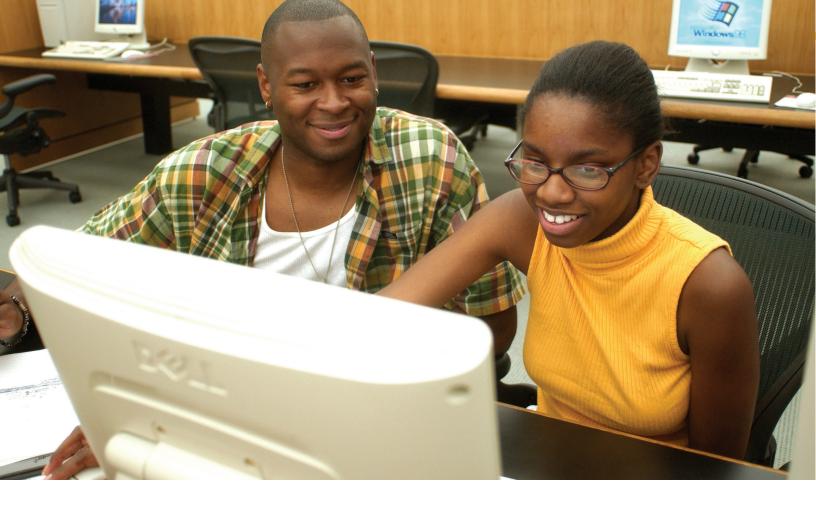
(University of the Pacific, 2015). Rios and Rocco (2014) and Hallet, Westland, and Mo (2018) recommend that high schools and higher education institutions support a foster care liaison. In higher education, this single point of contact for foster care youth would act as a mentor to help students overcome barriers, connect them to resources on and off campus, assist them in navigating the complexities of applying, enrolling, and persisting in college, engage them in extra- and co-curricular activities, and connect them with student employment opportunities (Davis, 2006; Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018). The foster care liaison would be in a position to integrate the necessary support systems to help foster youth succeed.

College success programs should focus on social, emotional, and academic needs (Dworksky, 2018). Foster youth should be provided with regular opportunities to interact with one another and with foster care college alumni (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013). Being involved with a support program can become part of their identity, while also providing the services they need. As a result, foster youth will no longer need to explain their situation constantly, or self-identify to each new person or department they contact (Field, 2017).

Foster care support programs can assist foster youth when they are emotionally triggered by course content that might otherwise cause them to disengage from class and college (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018). Other challenges may include a lack of support from peers, such as other foster youth who do not share the goals of higher education. This can result in emotional and physical abuse (Rios & Ricco, 2014), or contribute to distractions from course work resulting from family-related issues (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018).

Since 2012, the state of Michigan has been requesting and receiving donations from individuals, groups, and organizations, as well as through fundraising activities, to assist former foster youth financially in their transition to colleges and universities (Michigan Educational Trust, 2018). All funds raised are disbursed in the year that they are received via the Fostering Futures Scholarship (MET, 2018). This program provides scholarships to former foster care students who are attending one of 77 colleges and universities across the state (Michigan Students Scholarships and Grants, 2018). Students who qualify for this support receive up to $3,000 in scholarship funds distributed throughout the academic year (MiSSG, 2018). To date, the state has raised nearly $1 million dollars to help students cover tuition, books, and room and board expenditures (MET, 2018).

The California College Pathways program is a statewide collaboration between public and private higher education institutions, state agencies, philanthropic partners, and community organizations to promote foster youth success at community colleges and four-year universities (California College Pathways, n.d.). The program promotes seamless pipelines from high school to college, advocates for policies and regulations to improve educational outcomes, and provides training and technical assistance for new and established campus foster youth

programs. The organization has a website with resources for foster youth, higher education institutions, and caregivers. Each of the state's 114 community colleges has a Foster Youth Success Initiative liaison to help students with financial aid, scholarships, accessing student services, and campus resources. They also assist with academic planning for credential completion (California Community Colleges, n.d.).

Arizona State University's (ASU) Bridging Success Early Start Program supports foster care youth by providing new student orientation and workshops unique to their needs, a personal coach, and opportunities to make important connections on and off campus. The orientation introduces students to campus resources and success strategies. Workshops offered throughout the year focus on housing, community, personal support, financial, academic, and admissions resources (Arizona State University, 2018). Like many foster care youth programs in higher education, this program is privately funded. Also, in coordination with Maricopa Community College, Arizona State University has developed a program called Building Bridges, which assists foster youth with transfer success (Fryar, Jordan, & DeVooght, 2017).

Western Michigan University supports foster care youth through The Center for Fostering Success, which provides foster care youth with a designated space for them to connect with other foster youth and support staff to build relationships and to establish a community and a sense of belonging (Stansberry Beard & Gates II, 2018). Foster care youth are introduced to the college three months before they start in a Summer Campus Transition Week orientation. Here they are assigned a coach as

part of the University's coach-mentor-system. Foster care youth coaches aid students in preparing for academic and emotional success by helping them develop the skills to ask for help, to manage money responsibly, and to build networks on and off campus (Zalaznick, 2018).

The Virginia Community College system's Great Expectations program matches foster youth with a coach who serves as a healthy adult role model. Coaches reach out to foster youth while they are in high school to help match them with higher education options and assist with admissions and financial aid applications. Once a student is enrolled at a college, the coach assists with advising, finding additional mentoring support, tutoring, transportation, scheduling issues, and job searches (Virginia Community Colleges, n.d.).

The program at Austin Community College (ACC) has been in existence for 12 years, with licensed social workers or counselors serving as foster youth advocates. ACC has several initiatives in place to assist foster care alumni in navigating the college system, along with K-12 outreach and services for current students (Garman, 2018). ACC works with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' (DFPS) Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program to provide outreach to high school students. Last August, ACC hosted a two-day statewide summit for foster youth to help them start the college planning process and consider future career options. The PAL program identified students and offered transportation, while ACC provided room and board. Eighty foster youth from across the state attended workshops to learn about state tuition waivers, resources to

help them start and complete college, and money management. ACC also partnered with four-year institutions to better provide information to students.

Maricopa Community College District's (MCCD) Bridging Success Initiative has been in existence for three-and-a-half years and has implemented many low- or no-cost solutions to assist foster youth transition into higher education. MCCD serves foster youth through extensive training and outreach efforts based on Western Michigan University's Fostering Success Program Coach Training (Garman, 2018). There are three levels of training provided for faculty and staff to assist them with guiding foster youth through the college system. The first training level educates staff about the impact of trauma on foster youth, the system barriers that students face in the college and foster care systems, and the types of information that tends to confuse students. In the second training level, faculty and staff learn how to help foster youth with goal setting, working towards those goals, and problem solving. And in the third level, the district's coaches receive additional training so they are able to help students navigate problems that do not necessarily fall under the college's domain, which may include issues such as housing and accessing emergency funds.

There are several ways colleges might address food and housing insecurities. One way is to have a campus food pantry (Chatlani, 2018; Dewey, 2018). Campuses can coordinate with the Colleges and Universities Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA), an organization established to help colleges and universities start and maintain campus-based food pantries (CUFBA, 2018). It is recommended that campus food pantries partner with local area food centers to enhance what is available to students (Chatlani, 2018). This partnership may also encourage community-led farmers' markets on campus designed to provide fresh produce to students in need (Chatlani, 2018).

Another important factor in addressing hunger and homelessness is to engage the college community, most specifically by relying on faculty to observe students who appear to be in need. Sara Goldrick-Rab, Temple University professor and lead author on the ground-breaking Wisconsin-Hope Lab survey, points out that faculty are the ones most likely to encounter students who are struggling. She suggests including information on course syllabi identifying resources available to students, and encourages faculty to be watchful for signs of hunger and homelessness (Chatlani, 2018). Creating a culture of care can go a long way to helping students who are struggling (Chatlani, 2018).

Expansion of regulatory guidelines for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit qualification could help to reduce the number of students who are hungry. To qualify for SNAP, students must work at least 20 hours a week or receive federal work study funds (Blagg, Whitmore-Schanzenbach, Gundersen, & Ziliak, 2017). Since federal work study funding is limited, it cannot accommodate all who need these benefits. Likewise, students who work 20 hours a week off campus to qualify for the benefit often find themselves under

added pressure to manage both school and work (Blagg et al., 2017). For some students who are already struggling, this may be overwhelming.

Connecting students who were in foster care with financial resources is a key element to reducing barriers for this subgroup of students (Dworsky, 2017). Programs such as the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and the Education and Training Voucher provide services and funds to help former foster care students make the transition from the foster care system to adulthood (Dworsky, 2017). Helping students gain access to these important resources can remove some of the barriers that prevent foster care students from succeeding in school.

It is important to be sensitive to the fact that many students are unwilling to self-identify. The challenge community colleges face is getting the resources into the hands of those who need it most (Chatlani, 2018). Students are less apt to ask for help if they feel they may be ridiculed or regarded as unable to take care of themselves. Therefore, colleges must become adept at finding ways to destigmatize the help that is available to students who are hungry (Chatlani, 2018).

Community colleges should work with school and local agencies to help foster youth acquire college knowledge (Whitman, 2018). Coordination among these sectors is needed to help foster youth transition seamlessly to college (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). Many foster youth learn about post-secondary opportunities through someone in the child welfare system such as a social worker, caseworker, or independent living services provider (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). These individuals, along with other non-family adults, play a key role in the likelihood of a foster youth enrolling in college because they share resources and knowledge, offer advice, advocate, assist with networking, and possess a cultural knowledge of college (Okpych & Courtney, 2017).

Some college foster youth programs provide outreach to community and welfare organizations by sending staff to college fairs; organizing campus visits, tours and information sessions; meeting individual students; and connecting foster youth with students in their chosen major fields of study. Community colleges can provide information about foster youth support to high school counselors, connect with foster youth staff at transfer partner institutions, send mass mailings to foster youth and caregivers, and work with independent living services, child welfare agencies, and community organizations (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Open-door policies are critical for foster youth. Support staff should be accessible advocates for students to help them form connections with other departments on campus, such as career services (Hernandez & Naccarrato, 2010). Staff also can help students navigate issues outside of the college system, such as legal services and SNAP benefits. Lower staff-to-student ratios can help program staff develop relationships with foster care youth through regular contact, and allows support staff to identify issues before they become unmanageable (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Mentors can have a significant influence on students' academic pathways, since mentors help students steer through financial aid applications, the homeless documentation process, the search for a job, transportation, childcare, and finding money to pay for textbooks (Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018). Likewise, mentors may assist with campus needs, such as dorm room necessities, living with a roommate, computers, and/or materials for training programs. It is likely these students will need someone to monitor their academic progress and direct them to appropriate support services (Casey Family Programs, 2006).

Conclusion

Foster youth have similar dreams and aspirations as their non-foster peers. Their life experiences, however, have made them part of a highly vulnerable and at-risk student population, and most have never developed the knowledge and tools required to navigate the higher education system adequately. Even when organizations and states have programs in place to help this population, these students are not always aware of the resources available to them, nor how to acquire needed support.

It is critical that community colleges accept the challenge and help close the gap in postsecondary educational attainment between foster care youth and other students. Community college leaders are in the position to encourage and emphasize the importance of programs that can help these students become successful. Providing services for foster youth requires increased awareness of this student population and enhanced communication between community colleges, K-12 schools, and community resources. Mentoring programs, resource centers, and outreach programs can increase significantly the likelihood of foster youth success in higher education. In the end, it is imperative that we do not lose sight of the individual as the focus.

Colleges across the country are making a positive impact on the success of foster youth, but this problem demands more. Community colleges can provide the necessary resources to serve as a critical bridge for foster youth, with the goal of helping them transition from state care into adulthood and pursue a degree or credential in a safe and supportive environment. As Dr. Bob Bade stressed, "Especially at our level, we can make this crucial investment."

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