

I *This chapter examines what we know about the disparity in postsecondary educational attainment between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers, the reasons for it, and the policies and programs that have been developed to address that disparity. It also discusses the unique role that community colleges can play in reducing this disparity.*

Improving the Postsecondary Educational Attainment of Youth in Foster Care

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A college education is no less important to youth in foster care than to their non-foster care peers, but there continues to be a wide gap in postsecondary educational attainment between the two groups. This chapter begins with a summary of the research on the postsecondary educational attainment of youth in foster care. Next, it examines some of the reasons for the disparity in postsecondary educational attainment between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers. These reasons are followed by a brief review of some of the policies and programs that have been developed to reduce this disparity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the unique role that community colleges can play in improving the postsecondary educational outcomes of youth in foster care.

Demographic Characteristics and Foster Care Histories of Transition Age Youth

On September 30, 2015, 66,105 young people ages 16 and older in the United States were in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2016). Some of these young people will be reunified with family, adopted, or placed with a legal guardian, but between 20 and 30 thousand 18- to 21-year-olds *age out* of foster care each year without a permanent home. These young people are disproportionately youth of color from low-income families, and most came to the attention of the child welfare system after being neglected or abused. Despite these similarities, they are a heterogeneous group with respect to their experiences while in foster care (e.g., age at entry, number and types of placements, and service receipt).

Research on Educational Outcomes

Studies consistently show that youth entering foster care are more likely to be old for their grade level (i.e., held back one or more years) and do not perform as well on standardized assessments than other students their age (Smithgall, Jarpe-Ratner, & Walker, 2010). While in foster care, they are often concentrated in the lowest-performing schools and continue to lag behind their peers academically. Additionally, youth in foster care frequently experience placement changes, and these placement changes can lead to educational instability as youth move from school to school (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). This system can negatively impact a foster youth's educational process.

Compared to their non-foster care peers, youth in foster care are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to enroll in college if they complete high school, and less likely to graduate from college if they enroll (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). Between 1% and 11% of foster youth graduate from college, depending on the age at which graduation rates are measured (Emerson, 2006). By comparison, approximately 42% of young adults under age 25 have at least an associate degree and nearly one third have at least a bachelor's degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). These differences exist despite the fact that youth in foster care are no less likely to aspire to attend college and no less likely to expect to earn a college degree (Courtney, Tereo, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003).

Some of the differences in college graduation rates between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers could be due to differences in socioeconomic status (SES). Youth in foster care are generally from low-income families, and low SES students are less likely to graduate from college than their higher SES peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). However, two studies by Day and colleagues found that former foster youth are more likely to drop out of college and are slower to graduate from college than their first-generation college peers (Day, Dworsky, & Weng, 2013). Moreover, because the difference in graduation rates was concentrated among students in good academic standing, it was likely due to factors other than grades.

Factors Contributing to Low Postsecondary Educational Attainment

Previous research reveals that several factors may contribute to the gap in postsecondary educational attainment between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers.

- The child welfare system has traditionally done a poor job of encouraging youth in foster care to pursue postsecondary education.

- Many youth in foster care are not academically prepared for college because they experience frequent school changes, are tracked into basic education, attend low-performing schools, and are in need of remedial coursework.
- Most youth in foster care cannot turn to their parents for information about or assistance with the college application process or financial support.
- Many youth in foster care are unaware of their financial aid eligibility and lack support to help them through the financial aid process.
- Youth in foster care are much more likely to exhibit mental and behavioral health problems than their non-foster care peers, and this disparity persists into early adulthood (Pecora et al., 2006).
- Student services personnel at postsecondary institutions may be unfamiliar with the challenges faced by youth who are or were in foster care.
- Former foster youth have high rates of homelessness and housing instability (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky, Napolitano & Courtney, 2013).
- Birth rates and rates of early parenthood among youth in foster care continue to be high (Children's Bureau, 2014).

In sum, multiple factors are likely to contribute to the gap in postsecondary educational attainment between youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers. These factors are reviewed in more detail in chapter 2. Understanding these factors is important because efforts to increase the postsecondary educational attainment of youth in foster care are less likely to be successful if the underlying causes of the disparity between the educational outcomes of youth in foster care and their non-foster care peers are adequately addressed. Federal and state programs designed to help reduce the impact of these factors on attainment of higher education are described next.

Federal and State Programs to Promote Postsecondary Educational Access and Attainment

Efforts by policy makers to expand access to postsecondary education among youth in foster care and to increase their postsecondary educational attainment have led, in recent decades, to the creation of both state and federal programs that primarily address financial barriers to pursuing a college degree.

State Tuition Waiver Programs. Twenty-eight states have some sort of tuition assistance program that allows youth in foster care to attend public colleges or universities at no charge or at a significantly reduced rate (Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016). These programs typically cover unmet tuition and fees after applying all other sources of financial aid but students may be required to pay for housing, books, childcare, and transportation.

Eligibility requirements vary widely, and some states limit the number of waivers that can be given each year.

Targeted Scholarships. In some states, youth in foster care may be eligible for special scholarships or grants. However, eligibility requirements and the amount of assistance available vary widely across states.

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106–169) amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Chafee Program). CFCIP is the primary source of federal funding that states can use to prepare youth in foster care for the transition to adulthood. States can spend their Chafee dollars on a wide range of services and supports including services and supports aimed at promoting postsecondary educational attainment (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Education and Training Voucher Program. In 2001, Congress amended the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act with the creation of the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program (P.L.107–133). The program provides states with funding for educational and training vouchers based on their share of the total child welfare population. A 20% state match is also required. Some states administer their ETV program; others contract with a third party, such as the Foster Care to Success Foundation (FC2S), to handle the administration. States can use their ETV funds to provide eligible youth with up to \$5,000 of assistance each year to cover the costs of postsecondary education or training including tuition, fees, books, school supplies, computers, and room and board, as well as qualified living expenses (for example, rent, food, transportation, health insurance, or childcare). Award amounts are based the availability of funds and the cost of attendance not covered by other sources of financial aid. Youth must begin receiving assistance before their 21st birthday, but remain eligible until age 23 if they are making satisfactory progress toward program completion.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. A provision in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110–351) gave states the option to extend federally funded (that is, Title IV-E) foster care until age 21 to youth who meet eligibility criteria, one of which is being enrolled in a postsecondary or vocational education institution. As of March 2017, 24 states plus the District of Columbia had approval or were in the process of obtaining approval for extended federal foster care (Catherine Heath, Children’s Bureau, personal communication, March 10, 2017). This provision has implications for improving postsecondary educational outcomes in at least two respects. First, research suggests that extended foster care may promote college enrollment (although not necessarily graduation) (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Second, youth who are enrolled in a postsecondary education program are eligible for extended foster care, and states have an opportunity to provide those youth with educational services or supports.

Pell Grants. The federal Pell Grant program provides need-based grants which do not need to be repaid to low-income undergraduates based on the student's expected family contribution, the school's cost of attendance, and the student's enrollment status (full time or part time). The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (PL. 112–74) reduced the maximum number of semesters of Pell Grant eligibility from 18 to 12 semesters and did not allow for any exceptions. Because youth in foster care often require more time than their peers to complete a college degree, lowering the time limit on Pell Grant eligibility could adversely affect the ability of some foster youth to graduate from college.

To date, not much is known about the impact of these federal and state programs on the postsecondary educational attainment of youth in foster care. There is no national tracking and reporting system for the ETV program and state data on the receipt of tuition waivers or ETV funds, including graduation rates, are either difficult to locate or not available.

Although federal and state programs make college a more economically viable option for young people making the transition from foster care to college, they were designed with a more traditional pathway from high school to college in mind. However, it is not uncommon for youth in foster care to be older than age 18 by the time they complete high school, to delay their pursuit of postsecondary education due to parenting responsibilities or work requirements, or to take longer to graduate because they require remedial coursework. Hence, young people making the transition from foster care to college may become ineligible for the very programs that were designed to promote their attainment of postsecondary education. Another limitation of these state and federal policies and programs is they do not provide assistance with nonfinancial needs. Over the past two decades, college success programs have begun to fill this gap.

College Success Programs

College success programs, which can now be found at four-year colleges and universities as well as community colleges throughout the United States, provide wraparound services and supports to help youth who are or were in foster care succeed in school and graduate. Most are affiliated with a single college or university but some operate statewide. Some receive state funding, but many are funded, in whole or in part, by private philanthropy. Programs also vary with respect to their selectivity. Some require students to apply and only some are selected; others serve all eligible students who want to participate. Although each is unique, programs typically address some combination of financial, academic, housing, and social/emotional needs (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). College success programs at community colleges also help students who are interested in transferring

to a four-year school make that transition, often by connecting them with the four-year school's college success program.

The Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges are expected to meet the needs of a wide range of students, including many who are financially and educationally disadvantaged. Effectively serving these students means providing them with the academic supports necessary to promote their educational attainment and addressing their financial and other non-academic needs, such as housing, transportation, and childcare. Community college students can earn certificates, associate degrees, and credits to transfer to a four-year school.

For both academic and financial reasons, community college is a logical choice for current and former foster youth, and many of those youth who pursue higher education begin at a community college (Courtney et al., 2016). Community colleges allow students to take courses commensurate with their skill level. This is important for current or former foster youth who are often not prepared for college-level coursework and need remediation. College affordability is also major consideration for these young people who must often pay for their housing, transportation, books, food, and basic needs in addition to their tuition, and tuition costs are much lower at community colleges than those at four-year schools.

Research on community colleges and foster youth

To date, only one published study has examined the experiences of former foster youth enrolled in community colleges and how community colleges are responding to their needs (Cooper, Mery, & Rassen, 2008). Cooper's study, conducted by the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, used a mixed-methods design that included three components: a survey of Foster Youth Liaisons at community colleges throughout California, a statewide survey of community college students identified as former foster youth, and interviews with college staff at 12 community colleges that were visited by the researchers.¹

The study did have several limitations: (1) Foster Youth Liaisons from less than half of the state's 109 community colleges responded to the survey; (2) only community colleges whose Foster Youth Liaisons described their programs as "well-developed" were selected for site visits; (3) only students who had self-identified as former foster youth at colleges where the Foster Youth Liaison forwarded the survey had an opportunity to participate; and (4) only 74 of the hundreds if not thousands of former foster youth enrolled in California's community colleges responded to the survey.

These limitations notwithstanding, the study's findings are informative. First, students need more assistance with housing and financial aid. Few community colleges have a well-developed strategy to address housing

needs and many students were working 20 or more hours per week to support themselves. Second, many community colleges are trying to address the needs of current and former foster youth with little to no additional resources by relying on volunteers or overburdened staff who cannot provide students with the time-intensive supports they need. Lack of dedicated funding also limits the ability of programs to engage in outreach activities to potential students.

Based on their findings, the researchers recommended that programs (1) partner with relevant community college departments including administration to ensure that students have a broad network of on-campus supports; (2) adopt a case management model that allows each student to build a relationship with a trusted adult over time; (3) establish relationships with child welfare agencies, local businesses, and foundations to increase resource availability; and (4) track students' academic progress and use of services and establish benchmarks against which to evaluate the outcomes students achieve.

Community College Initiatives Targeting Youth in Foster Care

A handful of statewide initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of community college students who are or were in foster care have been established. One example is California's Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI), which has been sponsored by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) with support from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation since 2007. Every community and technical college in California is mandated by law to designate a foster care liaison that is responsible for helping foster youth access student services and academic supports. A statewide FYSI liaison works to implement policies affecting foster youth and improve collaboration between the community college system, the K–12 educational system, and the social services system.

Another example is Virginia's Great Expectations program, which began in 2008 as a partnership between five community colleges and the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education. The program has expanded to 18 community colleges and has several key components. These include tutoring, help with college admission and financial aid applications, career exploration, help finding and keeping jobs, life skills training, counseling, mentoring and tuition grant for foster youth who are not receiving sufficient grant funds to pay for their community college tuition and fees.

Moving Forward

Community colleges clearly have a key role to play in reducing the disparity in postsecondary educational attainment between youth who are or were in foster care and their non-foster care peers. Regardless of whether they begin and end their postsecondary education at a community college

or subsequently transfer to a four-year school, many current and former foster youth stand to benefit both academically and financially from starting at a community college. That said, community colleges must be prepared to effectively serve these students and help them overcome the unique challenges they face. This, in turn, requires additional knowledge about the experiences of community college students who are or were in foster care, how community colleges are responding to their needs, and whether the services they provide to those students are effective.

Note

1. The student survey was administered before California extended foster care to age 21.

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