WELL-BEING

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SUPPORTS

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WHY IT MATTERS

Youth in foster care often indicate they have college aspirations, yet numerous studies have found lower college enrollment and completion rates among young people who have been in foster care than among other young adults.[1] Although it has been hard to pinpoint a reliable number, some studies suggest that as few as three percent of youth from foster care will attain a Bachelor's degree by the time they are 26 years old.[2] In comparison, approximately 31% of 25 year olds in the United States have a Bachelor's Degree.[3] Supporting youth in and from foster care to increase postsecondary educational attainment would result in an increase in their average work-life earnings. With a four year degree, youth in foster care could expect to earn approximately $481,000 more, on average, over the course of their work-life than if they had only a high school diploma. Even if they did not graduate with a degree, completing any college courses would increase their work-life earnings, on average, by $129,000.[4]

> **Post-secondary educational attainment is a protective factor for life events that currently impact alumni of foster care disproportionately than other young adults.**

One study found that increased levels of education, whether it be a four year degree, two year degree or training in a particular field, have larger benefits for youth who exited care than youth from the general population.[5] Post-secondary educational attainment is a protective factor for a number of life events that currently impact alumni of foster care disproportionately than other young adults including homelessness, unemployment, substance use, early parenting, and involvement in the child welfare system as a parent. [6]

Remaining in foster care until age 21 and/or receiving mentoring services is correlated with increased college enrollment and completion. Likewise, young people who had more placement and school stability during their time in foster care are more likely to enroll and graduate from college. Having tangible supports such as housing, academic tutoring, transportation and financial resources are also factors that result in

greater retention and completion rates.[7] Studies have found that financial difficulties, parenting, needing to work, and concerns about housing are among the barriers that prevent former foster youth from pursuing postsecondary education.[8]

ADVOCATES IN ACTION

Nineteen young adults who were in foster care were interviewed about turning points in their lives that led them to complete a postsecondary education or who were on track to complete one. One of the turning points that participants identified were "safe havens," including school and home environments that provided a place of refuge from stresses in other parts of their lives. Participants noted that schools were spaces where they could demonstrate their academic competencies or gain access to new knowledge, helping them experience a relief from distress and an opportunity to engage in goal setting.

— M. Haas, Q. Allen & M. Amoah [9]

ACTIONS

- **Encourage and expose youth to postsecondary education opportunities.** For many youths in and from foster care, the possibility of attending college may never have been presented to them. Help them identify their interests and show them the many options available. Explain how post-secondary education can benefit them for the rest of their lives. One study found that taking a young person for a college campus visit was motivational in their desire to pursue higher education. Don't limit the exploration to four-year campuses as many youth will benefit from participation in a trade or two-year program.

- **Start early in planning for post-secondary or vocational opportunities.** One of the primary reasons youth from foster care have difficulty completing post-secondary programs is because they are unprepared academically, socially-emotionally and practically (e.g., knowing how to access financial aid support, housing, etc.).[10] Together, identify available services and supports that will help youth pursue and succeed in postsecondary education or vocational goals.

- **Be aware of trauma and past maltreatment** the youth experienced and the potential impact on their ability to seek help and build social supports. Past maltreatment and unstable relationships can leave youth emotionally guarded and reluctant to ask for help. Successfully completing post-secondary education is a formidable task for any young person, but especially so for a person lacking in connections. Connect the youth to professionals who can help them identify some of these potential post-traumatic risks and how to negotiate them effectively.

- **Teach youth how to advocate for themselves.** Encouraging, modeling and directing youth on how to engage in education decision making and planning helps them take active roles in their educational futures. When youth are able to effectively explain what their desires are, it helps adults who work and care for them better understand what direction and guidance they need.[11]

- **Connect youth with a mentor during high school who can stay with the youth through the transition to post-secondary education, at least the first couple of years.** Having a mentor during high school has shown to increase the likelihood a youth in foster care will enroll in college. Mentors not only provide encouragement and emotional support, they help the youth navigate financial aid supports, the application process, required college enrollment tests such as the ACT and SAT, housing, and the admission process.

- **Learn if your state allows youth in foster care to stay in care until age 21.**[12] While states vary on the requirements for staying in foster care until age 21, research indicates that youth who do stay in care until 21 have better post-secondary outcomes. Staying in foster care past age 18 may not be desirable for all youth who have the opportunity to do so. Consequently, this decision should be individualized. Some youth may initially opt to leave foster care at age 18 and then a year or so later, change their minds. Find out if there is an option available to return to their placement later.

- **Ensure youth have access to housing once in college as well as during school vacations and summers when campus housing may be unavailable.** An increasing number of campuses recognize the need for year-round housing and so will keep dorms open all year or arrange for alternative housing when necessary. If the campus a youth attends does not have this option, with the youth identify alternative options. Consider educating the school about the plight of students from foster care about the need for extended housing during these "off" periods of time.

- **Explore the financial aid supports and/or tuition waivers**[13] youth may qualify for. Many states now provide tuition waivers for students from foster care. Some provide scholarships especially for students in and from foster care. Most youth will also qualify for federal financial aid through Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) based on this criterion: *students who are in foster care, aged out of foster care or were adopted out of foster care after reaching age 13 are considered automatically independent on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).*[14] Ensure that youth are accessing this application as early as their junior year in high school if possible, although it's never too late to complete the application. Help them complete the application or find someone who can.

- **Identify with the youth on-campus support programs that they should connect with.** Many more community colleges and four-year universities are recognizing the unique needs that youth from foster care bring to their postsecondary experience and have created specialized programs and/or staff to support them. Academic, social and emotional supports are as equally important as housing, transportation, child care, health care, financial aid, etc. If a program is not available on campus, help the youth make connection with individuals from different support offices who can guide them.

- **Remember that youth with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education are entitled to supports under federal and state laws.**[15] Some youth with disabilities may be eligible to continue their high school education until age 21 or 22 depending on the state they reside in.[16] This doesn't preclude them from seeking further education afterwards in a post-secondary program and they should have all the same supports as any other youth.

- **Ensure that youth have adult guidance, encouragement and support throughout their postsecondary education.** Many students in general don't make it past their first year of college. For youth in and from foster care, they are at even greater risk as they often lack the emotional and practical support that a parent usually provides to their child during this potential challenging time. Checking in frequently about how they are doing, what they need help with and just lending an empathetic ear can go a long way. Help youth identify people in their life who can fulfill this function.

BRIGHT SPOT

CENTER FOR FOSTERING SUCCESS WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, KALAMAZOO, MI

A growing number of two-year community colleges and four-year universities are developing on campus programs for students who are still currently in foster care or who were in foster care. Recognizing that these students bring a unique set of challenges and opportunities to their post-secondary experiences, these programs provide supports and services that help students in and from foster care achieve their post-secondary education goals. One such program is *The Center for Fostering Success*, located at the Western Michigan University campus. Its mission is to improve college graduation and career achievement rates among youth and young adults (12 to 25 years old) aging out of the foster care system. In alignment with the WMU's mission, the activities of the Center are learner-centered, and discovery driven.

The five goals of the Center are to:

1. Create successful transitions from foster care-to-college and college-to-career for students ages 12 to 25 through the experience of higher education.

2. Educate the community in the college-to-career pipeline about the needs, challenges, and discovery-driven solutions related to students from foster care.

3. Develop leaders among alumni of foster care to enhance the greater community and society.

4. Connect strong and enduring networks addressing needs of youth and alumni of foster care in relation to higher education and career.

5. Sustain the backbone structure of the *Center for Fostering Success* to support the above goals.

WELL-BEING

THE *SEITA SCHOLARS* PROGRAM[17]

An integral part of the Center is the *Seita Scholars Program*. Over the last eight years, it has become internationally recognized as one of the largest and most comprehensive support programs for college students who experienced foster care.

In the 2016–2017 academic year, there were 91 *Seita Scholar* graduates. In addition to providing academic support and financial aid, the program provides support in accessing basic living needs like housing, transportation, and child care. Additionally, staff who work with the students are trained in trauma-informed practices and resiliency building.

To learn more: https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess[18]

Western Michigan University — Fostering Success website (wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess)

Seita Scholars graduates
During the 2016-17 academic year, the Seita Scholars Program will recognize its 100th graduate!

The Center for Fostering Success was officially approved by Western Michigan University's Board of Trustees in 2012. Our mission is to improve college graduation and career achievement rates among youth and young adults (12 to 25 years old) aging out of the foster care system. In alignment with the WMU's mission, the activities of the Center are learner-centered and discovery driven. We provide leadership that informs teaching, research, learning, and public service as it relates to the topic of foster care and higher education. The knowledge and innovations developed within the Center for Fostering Success is focused on action in applied settings.

The Center is led by Dr. Yvonne Unrau, Professor of Social Work and Director of the Center for Fostering Success, who teams with Ronicka Hamilton, Director of the Seita Scholars Program and Maddy Day, Director of Outreach and Training to shape the activities and direction of the Center's goals and activities. The Center reports to the Provost, Office of Academic Affairs, on matters related to the Seita Scholars program, and to the College of Health and Human Services for outreach and training programs.

The Center has three major programs:

1. Seita Scholars Program
2. Fostering Success Michigan
3. Fostering Success Coach Training

The above three programs work collectively to accomplish the five goals of the Center, which are to:

- Create successful transitions from foster care-to-college and college-to-career for students ages 12 to 25 through the experience of higher education.
- Educate the community in the college-to-career pipeline about the needs, challenges, and discovery-driven solutions related to students from foster care.
- Develop leaders among alumni of foster care to enhance the greater community and society.
- Connect strong and enduring networks addressing needs of youth and alumni of foster care in relation to higher education and career.
- Sustain the backbone structure of the Center for Fostering Success to support the above goals.

CAMPUS PARTNERS

- Academic Advising Offices
- AFSCME Local 1668 (service union)
- Career and Student Employment Services
- Center for Academic Success Programs
- Children's Trauma Assessment Center
- Counseling Services
- Dining Services
- Disability Services for Students
- Division of Multicultural Affairs
- Division of Student Affairs
- First-Year Experience
- LBGT Student Services
- Office of Admissions
- Residence Life
- Sindecuse Health Center
- Student Financial Aid and Scholarships
- WMU Department of Public Safety

WELL-BEING

SELECTED RESOURCES [19]

Name	Description
California College Pathways[20]	This site has a wealth of resources on postsecondary education for students in or formerly in foster care, including a *Foster Youth Educational Planning Guide.*[21]
Educational Training Vouchers (ETVs)[22] and John H. Chafee Independence Program[23]	The *Education and Training Vouchers* (ETV) program provides financial assistance for post-secondary training and education to youth who have aged out of foster care or who have left foster care after age 16 for kinship guardianship or adoption. This resource also includes information on other college scholarships, vocational education, and tuition waivers for youth who have been involved in or were adopted from the child welfare system.
Fostering Success Michigan[24]	This resource maintains a National Postsecondary Support Map of all four-year campus-based support programs for youth in and from foster care.
GuardianScholars[25]	These collaborative programs that are now present in a growing number of college campuses (33 at last count, mainly located in California), leverage the expertise and resources of the private sector and public agencies to support students effectively and cost efficiently. Their goal is: *create a powerful team dedicated to assisting deserving foster youth achieve their dreams of an education, realize true independence, and reach their full potential.*
Persistence Plus[26]	This program uses a "nudging model" to increase college persistence, by sending individualized reminders to students. Randomized trials with partners have shown a significant impact on persistence for first-generation college goers, online learners and returning adults. This model will be implemented in California for foster youth and non-minor dependents in foster care attending college, who are participating in 40 different housing programs across the state.
University of Cincinnati, Higher Education Mentoring Initiative[27]	This program helps prepare foster youth for educational opportunities beyond high school. The program recruits, trains and supports mentors to establish positive long-term relationships with youth in and from foster care including helping them prepare to submit college applications. Foster youth who participated in HEMI were much more likely to finish high school, enroll in a post-secondary institution, and obtain a job than their emancipated foster peers.

ENDNOTES

1   Geiger, J.M., & Beltran, S.J. (2017). Experiences and outcomes of foster care alumni in postsecondary education: A review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review, 79,* 186-197.

2   Ibid.

3   https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf

4   Peters, C., Dworsky, A., Courtney, M., & Pollack, H. (2009). *Extending Foster Care to Age 21: Weighing the Costs to Government against the Benefits to Youth.* Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

5   Okpych, N.J. & Courtney, M.E. (2014). Does education pay for youth formerly in foster care? Comparison of employment outcomes with a national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review, 43,* 18-28.

6   See "Preventing Intergenerational Involvement" Issue Brief

7   Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.J., Williams, J., Downs, A. C., English, D.J., White, J. & O'Brien, K. (2009). *What Works in Foster Care? Key Components of Success from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study.* New York: Oxford University Press.

8   Day, A., Riebschleger, J., Dworksy, A., Damashek, A., Fogarty, K. (2012). Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change, *Children and Youth Services Review, 34* (5), 1007-1014.

9   Haas, M., Allen, Q., & Amoah, M. (2014). Turning points and resilience of academically successful foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 44,* 387-392.

10 See "High School Graduation and Post-Secondary Planning" Issue Brief

11 See "Promoting Youth Engagement" Issue Brief

12 http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx

13 https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Tuition-Assistance-Programs-for-Foster-Youth-in-Postsecondary-Education.pdf

14 https://www.fastweb.com/financial-aid/articles/financial-aid-and-scholarships-for-foster-care-and-adopted-children

15 https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html; http://studentcaffe.com/prepare/students-with-disabilities/ada-your-rights-college-student

16 https://answers.ed.gov/link/portal/28022/28025/Article/654/Special-education-eligibility-school-aged

17 https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/seita

18 https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess

19 Additional resources on this topic are also available in the "High School Completion and Postsecondary Education" and "Preventing Intergenerational Child Welfare Involvement" Issue Brief

20 http://www.cacollegepathways.org/

21 http://www.cacollegepathways.org/
    ?s=foster+youth+educational+planning+guide

22 https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/
    independent/support/vouchers/

23 https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/chafee-foster-
    care-program

24 http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/

25 http://www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/pdfs/
    GuardianScholars.pdf

26 https://www.persistenceplusnetwork.com/

27 https://www.uc.edu/cechpass/hemi/partners.html