



The Challenge of Retaining College Students Who Grew up in Foster Care

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Young people who live in foster care until the age of majority (typically 18 years old) are among the most disadvantaged of America's youth in terms of educational opportunities. There are nearly 25,000 youth "aging out" of the foster care system annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Only half of young people in foster care graduate from high school, and fewer than 10 percent attend college (Wolanin, 2005). Only 3 percent of foster youth are estimated to graduate from post-secondary institutions within a 6 year period (Davis, 2006).

A Portrait of Young People Who Grow up in Foster Care

The experience of growing up in foster care does not prepare young people well for college (Geenen and Powers, 2007). Within the foster care system, services for youth are coordinated by caseworkers often with little or no input from youth (Johnson, Yoken, and Voss's (1995). After "aging out" between the ages of 18 and 21, these youth have no permanency or legal ties to adult caregivers and often respond alone to the many demands of living independently. These demands include but are not limited to finding or sustaining safe housing, finding affordable health care, pursuing education or employment training, and coordinating transportation which may involve public transit or attempting to purchase a car without someone to co-sign the loan. With their young lives managed by caseworkers, foster youth often experience a frustrating paradox where they have little or no opportunity to practice skills of self-determination while in foster care, but upon case closure are expected to be able to control and direct their own lives (Geenen and Powers, 2007).

Research has consistently shown that foster children lag behind their non-foster peers in school in several areas. One in three foster children is enrolled in special education classes (e.g., Burley and Halpern, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001; Shin and Poertner, 2002; Courtney, Terao and Bost, 2004; Pecora et al 2005), which is double the rate of non-foster youth (Burley and Halpern, 2001). The high rate of special education classes may be related to a second problem area; that is, reading level deficits among foster children. For example, Courtney, Terao and Bost (2004) observed that two-thirds of foster youth at age 17 were reading below high school level, a finding that supported earlier research reporting reading deficits among foster youth (Courtney et al., 2001; Shin and Poertner, 2002). Other research has identified that, on average, foster youth score 15 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth on statewide achievement tests, and that such educational deficits were the same regardless of whether youth remain in short- or long-term foster care (Burley and Halpern, 2001).

In light of these many academic challenges, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that one in three foster youth repeat a grade level (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao and Bost,

2004; Pecora et al 2005); a rate of grade failure that is twice that of non-foster youth (Burley and Halpern, 2001). The reason for repeating a grade may well be linked to the fact that foster youth change schools often. Research has consistently reported that more than one-third of foster youth experience five or more different school placements (Courtney, Terao and Bost, 2004).

Poor academic preparation and lack of “family privilege”—or the presence of family ties and support—leave foster youth without a safety net that most other college students rely upon to transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Seita and Brendthro, 2005). The support gap exists despite several federal and state level initiatives to support young people aging out of foster care. For example, a research study by Geenen and Powers (2007) noted how former caseworkers who extend continued support to youth after case closure must do so out of the goodness of their hearts and on their own time since the system does not pay for such “service.” In general, the experience of foster care is not well understood by the general population. Former foster youth are reluctant to identify with their formative years in care because of the negative stigma attached to it.

In sum, the event of aging out of foster care forces foster youth into an abrupt transition into independence and adulthood. There is a huge gap between the expectations of college life and the readiness of foster youth to meet the academic, social and financial expectations of higher education. By definition, foster youth who age out of the system do not have permanency or legal ties to family or guardians, and so are released from the system to make it on their own. Most are unaware that they lack many privileges that put them at a distinct disadvantage for success in adulthood in general, and higher education achievement in particular.

A Higher Education Response to the Plight of Foster Youth

In April 2007 Western Michigan University (WMU) created the Foster Youth and Higher Education Initiative, with the overall goal of increasing opportunity for foster youth to pursue higher education and to provide supports that promote success and well-being throughout the undergraduate experience. The Seita Scholars program was developed as part of the initiative, and now, in its second year of operation, serves 74 students. The program was designed using materials published by Casey Family Programs and by studying other university programs that support foster youth, such as the Guardian Scholars program at Cal State Fullerton.

In addition to offering a full undergraduate tuition scholarship, WMU’s Seita Scholars program provides students with support in seven life domains, as identified by Casey Family Programs (2006):

1. academic preparation
2. financial security
3. housing stability
4. physical and mental health care

5. supportive relationships and community connections
6. cultural and personal identity development
7. life skills for campus survival

Moreover, the program aims to create a *community of scholars* among this segment of WMU's student population. More than providing these students with an undergraduate education, WMU has developed strategies—both individual and systemic—to help former foster youth transition into adulthood through the experience of higher education.

Assessing Student Need

The Seita Scholars Program accepted its first cohort of students in fall 2008. During the first year of the program we observed students actions, listened to their stories, and witnessed many day-to-day challenges that compromise the college-going experience. The following examples show challenges in five of the seven life domain areas:

- Education: An 18-year-old freshman who grew up in Detroit foster care lived in seven homes and changed high schools five times during his teen years. He attributes his academic success to “always having street smarts” and the high school counselor who recognized his academic potential and dedicated after school hours to help him prepare for college. Upon arriving at college, there was no one to cheer him on.
- Financial Aid: A 19-year-old single mother and college student crashes her car after sliding down a snow-slicked hill and hitting a tree. She needs a vehicle to transport her daughter to day care and get to medical appointments. Financial aid does not cover the cost of car replacement and she has no one to co-sign a car loan.
- Housing: A 20-year-old student with no family safety net has no place to live during winter break campus closure.
- Physical and Mental Health: A student with chronic health conditions becomes ineligible for Medicaid upon her 21st birthday. She has no health insurance to pay for needed medication or treatment.
- Social Relationships and Community Connections: A childhood of abuse and neglect, along with a series of foster home and school placements, has an 18-year-old student feeling wary of trusting adults, especially those in positions of authority.

Many students from foster care experience multiple challenges across several of the life domain areas. The unique nature of their life struggle affects student engagement and academic progress in a variety of ways.

Engaging in Dialogues

Use of an assessment tool such as the College Student Inventory Form A (CSI-A) provides insight about the students' overall readiness for college, as well as information on specific competencies needed to be successful in college. Many foster youth were subjected to

psychological and learning evaluations in their youth, leaving them mistrustful of formal assessments. The CSI has face validity for these students, and provides practical information that is directly relevant to the college experience. The Seita Scholars program began administering the CSI to students in the fall 2009. Individual results are shared with students by a Seita Campus Coach, who is a master's-level professional with knowledge of foster care and its impact on youth. In addition to pinpointing students' strength and gap areas on 19 different scales, the CSI provides an educational context for students to share and sort out relevant aspects of their childhood and foster care experiences affecting their college-going experiences. In this first year of using the CSI, the Seita Scholars program has used the CSI as a tool to assess and better understand individual student needs. For instance, students review the Student Reports with their campus coach. This gives the students opportunity to reflect, share and discuss their perceived strengths and weaknesses. Through this dialogue students report affirming what they already knew about themselves, as well as learning new insights. In cases where students felt judged by a "negative" result, the report provided the campus coach an opening to use a strengths-based perspective to individual and interpersonal challenges by acknowledging areas of growth and new learning opportunities. A next step, referencing the Summary and Planning Report, is to examine CSI scores of our students compared to the normative scores of other students attending four-year institutions.

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