



Expanding our Understanding of Student Experiences and the Supports and Programs for College Students with Foster Care Experience: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Foster Care and Higher Education

Jennifer M. Geiger¹ · Royel M. Johnson²

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Young people with foster care experience are among the most disadvantaged and underserved groups in education, particularly at the postsecondary level. In fact, it is estimated that only 77% of youth with foster care experience will graduate from high school or receive a GED by age 21 (Courtney et al., 2011). Although no national statistics exist, studies show that only approximately 3–10% of students with foster care experience will earn a college degree despite high aspirations for attending college (e.g., Courtney et al., 2011; McMillen et al., 2003).

Over the last two decades, there has been some momentum among federal and state legislators to act in addressing barriers to postsecondary access and attainment for students with foster care experience. For instance, in 2001 Congress authorized the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program, which provides students with foster care experience up to \$5000 a year to use towards postsecondary education expenses. States have also begun to adopt tuition and fee waivers for students with foster care experience (Hernandez et al., 2017; Parker & Sarubbi, 2017) and some require foster care liaisons on college campuses. Postsecondary education institutions and philanthropic organizations have supported campus support programs (CSPs) that offer social, emotional, and academic supports to students to assist with navigating the college experience.

Research has also grown rapidly in the past decade to better understand student experiences and the impact of such policies and programs (e.g., Courtney & Hook, 2017; Geiger

& Beltran, 2017; Geiger & Okpych, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Okpych et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2016). However, much remains to be known about diverse student experiences, especially for racial and sexual minoritized groups. We still know very little on the impact of various programs (e.g., ETV, tuition waivers, and CSPs) and their roles in student success. We continue to seek increased understanding of ways to promote student success prior to and after enrollment in postsecondary education institutions.

The National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education (NRC-FAHE) was founded to better organize the policy, practice, and research priorities among interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners with the goal of promoting educational access and success among individuals with foster care experience. The NRC-FAHE initiated the idea of a special issue that would bring together work that examines the experiences and outcomes of students with foster care backgrounds. The purpose of this special issue of the *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* was to share a collection of articles from across disciplines/fields that provide new insight into the policies, programs, and experiences of students with foster care backgrounds to move the field forward. Included in this special issue are 8 articles and two invited commentaries by authors in social work, social welfare, higher education, and non-government policy institutes. The authors include those with significant practice and policy experience and lived expertise. The articles and commentaries offer important implications and recommendations for how the child welfare system and secondary and postsecondary education systems can improve opportunities and outcomes for students with foster care experience.

This special issue includes articles that address several policies, programs, and practices such as financial aid (Gross et al., 2023), Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) (Hanson et al., 2023), mental health services (Lietz

✉ Jennifer M. Geiger
geigerj@uic.edu

¹ Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois Chicago, 1040 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607, USA

² Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

& Cheung, 2023), foster care liaisons (Bustillos et al., 2023), and mentoring (Gowdy et al., 2023). It also includes commentaries from experts that critically examine the systems that often create barriers for youth with foster care experience in equitably accessing and succeeding postsecondary education. They both offer recommendations for those working with students before and after transitioning into adulthood.

Hanson et al., (2023) provide evidence for the impact of ETVs funded by the federal government and managed by states. They offered a glimpse into how ETVs are allocated, used, and what impact they have on student's enrollment and graduation. Their study is the first multi-state evaluation of ETV to be published and offers important implications for policy and practice.

Bustillos et al., (2023) present an innovative approach to supporting students with foster care backgrounds on college campuses via foster care liaisons. Indeed, their conceptual framework provides a roadmap for how postsecondary institutions across the U.S. can leverage foster care liaisons to promote successful transitions into postsecondary education and foster positive student experiences and outcomes.

Lietz and Cheung (2023) describe the ASuPIRE program at Arizona State University that expands their campus support program, Bridging Success to better meet the mental health needs of students with a history of foster care. They discuss the need for a special focus on supporting students' mental health as a key strategy for college success. Their article provides concrete ways that a similar program could be developed and delivered, what policies and supports are necessary for such a program and offer recommendations for next steps in assessing and evaluating such an intervention.

Gross et al., (2023) use data from the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) to show the relationship between financial aid and elements of human capital, habitus, and school and community contexts, and postsecondary education completion among college students with foster care background. They found that financial aid may play a positive role in promoting postsecondary educational success.

Gowdy et al., (2023) examined the core and capital mentoring relationships with students with foster care experiences. Their findings show that core mentors were more stable over time and highlight the need for mentoring relationships and how informal mentors can serve as a source of social capital for youth in care.

Two articles centered often overlooked subgroups of college students with foster care experience. Devost (2023) draws on qualitative data with Black college women to examine how they make meaning of their time in foster care and its influence on their college experiences and racial identity development. Her findings illustrate the complexity of

racial identity development among students with foster care backgrounds.

McCormick et al., (2023) explored the experiences of sexual and gender minority (SGM) students as they interact with campus-based support systems. They provide a narrative review of conceptual and empirical literature and identify the gaps that exist and offer recommendations for best practices for supporting SGM students with foster care backgrounds while on campus.

Mountz et al., (2023) used a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach with college students with foster care experience to understand barriers and promoters of retention in college by analyzing 'I' poems created by students. Their findings include important implications for campus professionals as supports for students with foster care experiences.

Finally, we close with two invited commentaries. Maddy Day (2023) critically examines what is known about students with foster care experience and postsecondary education, the progress that has been made over the last several decades and where research, policy, and practice has fallen short, often excluding students who identify as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous. She describes how a lack of data, literature, and a critical perspective on educational experiences and outcomes prevents us from making progress in understanding how to better promote postsecondary educational success among students with foster care experience. Day (2023) issues a call to action for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers and offers specific strategies for change that promote options and opportunities to all youth with foster care experience.

In his commentary, Dr. Kenyon Lee Whitman (2023) describes the family regulation system as an "oppressive force that disenfranchises children and families" rather than one that is caring or supportive to youth and their families (p. 1). He discusses how experiences within this carceral system create barriers as youth engage with postsecondary education systems. Dr. Whitman discusses ways we can be better informed about the impact of the family regulation system has on youth and their education and proposes ways we can better create opportunities for access, equity, and success for students with foster care experience, particularly students of color.

Conclusion

College and universities have an institutional responsibility to meet the needs of their students. For too long, however, postsecondary leaders and even state and federal policy makers, have been silent on the considerable challenges that shape students with foster care experience pathways into and through college. This special issue was designed to raise

national awareness about their educational experiences and outcomes and to present findings from the latest research that inform policy and practice. There is much more work to be done. We call on educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to commit to improving the material conditions of young people impacted by foster care.

Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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