Beyond the 3%: Educational Success for All, Not the Privileged Few

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"Africans who were enslaved didn't want an easier form of slavery…They dreamed of freedom…Our ancestors, they dreamed about the capacity for a Black man to be able to go to college, to learn, to produce and contribute ideas to the world. That was the dream."

(Shawn Ginwright, 2022).

Naming the Elephant in the Room

"Only three percent of young people from foster care will earn a college degree."

In the field of postsecondary access and success for youth with experience in foster care, the statement above is exceedingly familiar. This statistic has dominated our field since the release of the 2009 Midwest Study and has been a powerful data point to compare the educational outcomes of students with experience in foster care against their general population peers (Courtney et al., 2009). The shock of "3%" illustrates a discrepancy in outcomes so stark, that even those unfamiliar with the foster care system were compelled to act. Since that time our field has grown exponentially. Dozens of campus support programs have been established across the country, statewide higher education and foster care initiatives have been launched in over a third of states, progressive state-level policies have been passed, legislative and philanthropic funding has led to incredible innovation, and research has expanded such that those with lived experience in foster care are now leading studies and publishing from a participatory action research framework (see Fig. 1).

We have become a distinct field working across the disciplines of social work, education, and others while bridging the silos of research and practice. The fruit of our collaboration and partnership is evident in the numbers of students who receive postsecondary credentials every year. Yet, with over a decade's time gone by, the field continues to cling to

the "3%" narrative as its rallying cry. Instead of fighting to get beyond this number, we default to a scarcity mindset, believing that the goal is to get *to* the 3% and not *beyond*. We celebrate those students with experience in foster care who achieve postsecondary credentials as "part of the 3%." We make them the exception, the elite, but we fail to ask ourselves what about the other 97%? Where is our rallying cry for them? Why have we allowed the narrative of the few to be the narrative that guides our field? We must begin to ask, "what will it take for ALL students with experience in foster care to access, persist, and succeed in achieving a postsecondary credential?".

I have come to believe that in not talking about the other 97%, we are excluding those students who are furthest from opportunity and hardest to reach. We are excluding those students who we know are systemically underserved and disadvantaged beyond their foster care experience. To say it plainly, we are excluding our students with experience in foster care who are Black, Latinx, and Indigenous. If "zero percent" of Black students in the Los Angeles foster care system enroll in the University of California system (Harvey et al., 2020), the answer is clear, our systems need to respond to Black and Brown students with experience in foster care differently.
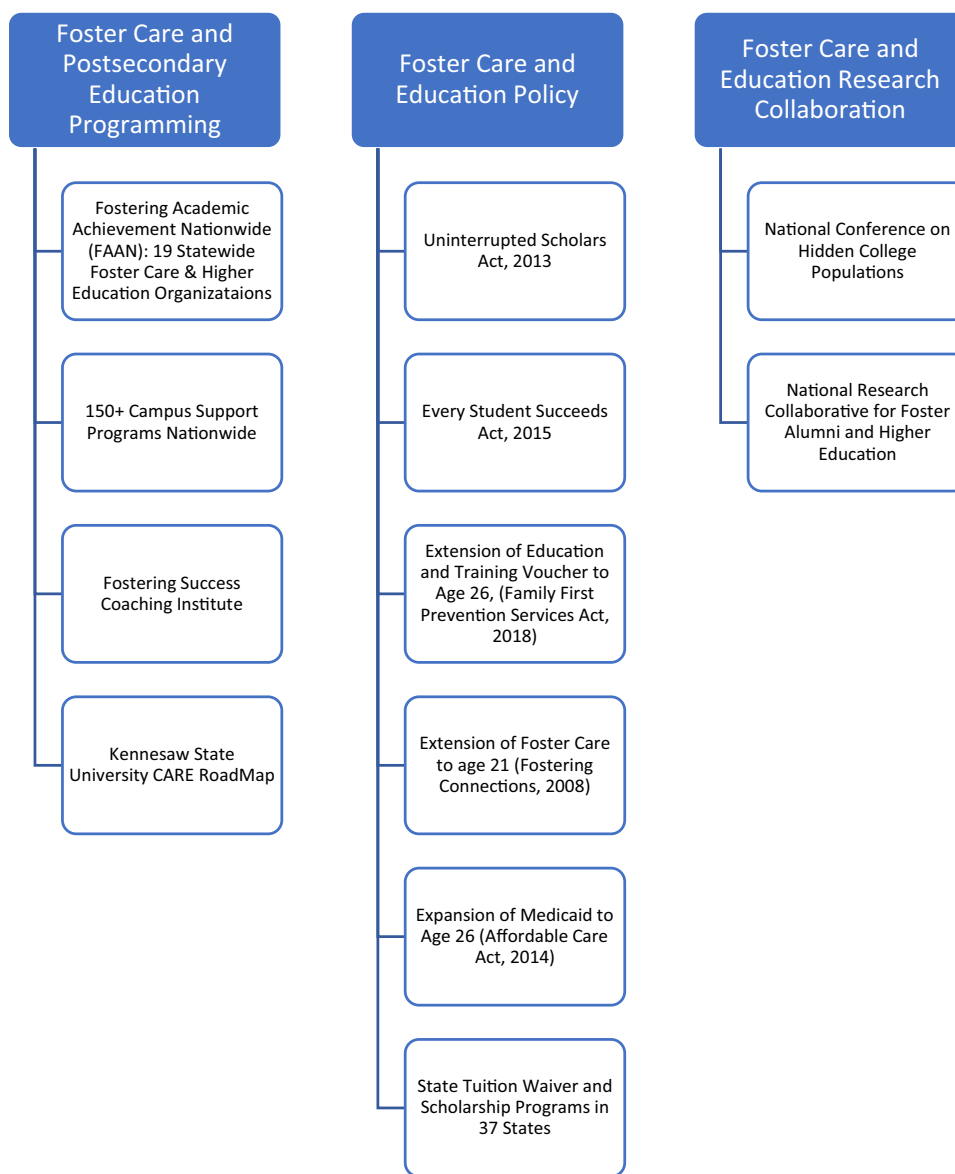
The Subtle Ways We Fail Our Students

Very few research studies in our field focus specifically on the experiences of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students with experience in foster care, despite the data that tells us these populations are overrepresented in the foster care system. Data disaggregation is standard in both the fields of social work and education, however, with a few notable exceptions (i.e., Geiger & Okpych, 2022), there is a distinct lack of disaggregated data related to our students of color with experience in foster care. We must insist that this basic data and research principle becomes standard practice in our field, regardless of the naysayers who push back by excusing the population as too small. To them I say, this population

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Fig. 1 A decade of progress in foster care and higher education programming, policy, and network development

Foster Care and Postsecondary Education Programming
- Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide (FAAN): 19 Statewide Foster Care & Higher Education Organizataions
- 150+ Campus Support Programs Nationwide
- Fostering Success Coaching Institute
- Kennesaw State University CARE RoadMap

Foster Care and Education Policy
- Uninterrupted Scholars Act, 2013
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015
- Extension of Education and Training Voucher to Age 26, (Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018)
- Extension of Foster Care to age 21 (Fostering Connections, 2008)
- Expansion of Medicaid to Age 26 (Affordable Care Act, 2014)
- State Tuition Waiver and Scholarship Programs in 37 States

Foster Care and Education Research Collaboration
- National Conference on Hidden College Populations
- National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education

has always been considered "too small" but that did not stop us before, why should it stop us now?

When I started the University of Washington Champions program in 2010, there were 18 students identified as having experience in foster care on the campus of roughly 42,000 students. It would have been easy for the administration to deny the extra resources needed to support just 18 students, but they understood that what the university could gain from understanding how to support those students could be used to better support every student. Instead, they recognized that those 18 students had already overcome more barriers than most to get to campus and it was our job to meet them where they were at to ensure a pathway for success moving forward. Unfortunately, the commitment made by the University of Washington is still more the exception than the rule as postsecondary institutions often challenge the need

to allocate resources for our "small" population of students. Yet the principle remains, to effectively improve postsecondary education outcomes for all students with experience in foster care our scholars, practitioners, and advocates need to know how to better meet the needs of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. With research to guide us, we can build practices and policies grounded in cultural humility and attend to the systemic racialized experiences our students face ultimately providing a more supportive pathway toward their educational goals.

As a practitioner I have been asked numerous times for examples of programming and activities that center racial identity or provide space for cultural exploration, and every time I am asked, I come up short. We know that providing a sense of belonging to students means creating spaces for them to abide in and experience their intersectional

identities, yet so few programs and practices reflect this. Most often, we focus on the young person's identity in relation to their foster care experience to the exclusion of all other identities and we assume that students will find community to support their other identities outside of our programs. When race and ethnicity is such a critical part of our lived experience, it is unacceptable that we are not utilizing practices that allow students with experience in foster care to integrate their whole selves into the spaces that are designed to serve them. It begs the question, what have we not reconciled in ourselves that is keeping us from fully and authentically engaging in healing and belonging practices with the students we serve? We have been touting the practices of authentic youth engagement for years, yet I have to pause and wonder how authentic we are really being when we fail to create space for conversations about race and the realities of our experiences based on race. My fellow practitioners and I have much to examine when it comes to our own internalized racism and paternalism and the ways we uphold oppressive beliefs about what students are capable of, should aspire to, or can withstand.

When it comes to policy, we struggle further. Thanks in great part to the work of John Burton Advocates for Youth, we have evidence that the traditional Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policies are antiquated and racially biased. Not only are a quarter of California community college students receiving Pell Grants not achieving SAP for their first two terms, but Black students are twice as likely as white students to fail to meet SAP (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021). The impact of these policies results in Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students more frequently losing their financial aid and becoming disproportionately burdened by debt. California has taken steps to remedy the situation through legislation that extends the amount of time students have to meet the SAP standard before losing the Education Training Voucher. But why is it that only California taken this step? What is keeping us from innovating and pushing beyond our current status quo? If every state took up the SAP policy change as California did, it would not matter where a student went to school, they could be guaranteed an equitable opportunity to utilize the resource of the Education Training Voucher while also navigating the early challenges of postsecondary education without fear of losing the financial support they have a right to. Making equitable policy changes like SAP reform may be challenging on the federal level, but we have every ability to advocate for these changes at the state and institutional level.

If we as field truly believe that postsecondary education is a pathway to more equitable outcomes for students with experience in foster care, then we must make our research, programs, and policies reflect that belief. As we look to the next decade of growth for our field, it is time to leave behind the 3% narrative and take up a different rallying cry: Education success is a right for all, not a privilege for the few.

Calling the Field into Action

To launch the next decade of field innovation, I am calling on all of us to form coalitions of people with lived experience in foster care, researchers, and practitioners to co-design solutions that center the experience of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students with experience in foster care and seek to understand their specific journeys to and through postsecondary education.

A Call to Researchers

You have the opportunity to take on the 3% data point at the root. I urge you to revisit the education components of major longitudinal research projects like the Midwest Study and the CALYouth study and apply an equity lens to understand what we know now after more than a decade of research, practice, and policy. We need co-designed studies that include diverse perspectives of researchers, practitioners, and those with lived experience to dig deeper to understand the vulnerabilities in our education pipeline for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students with experience in foster care. Collaborative research coalitions of researchers and practitioners can leverage databases such as the National Student Clearinghouse and state child welfare databases to better tell the story of how our students are moving to and through postsecondary education. The field must commit to broadening the data we deem valuable and include the voices of lived experience as data, furthermore it is essential to disaggregate all data by LGBTQIA+, gender, race, and ethnicity and push the analysis of data to ask who is not being represented? As researchers the data you generate and the meaning you make from it has the power to drive what we see as possible in our field.

A Call to Practitioners

It is time for us to confront the structures of our systems, patterns of behavior, and mental models that have kept us from developing practices that allow for our students to be seen and engaged as whole people. We must evolve from trauma-informed to healing-centered practices that are informed by our interdisciplinary peers and our students. And to do this, we need to give space for dialogue that promotes truth and reconciliation both for our students and for us. It is time for us to draw a line and agree that it is no longer acceptable for any practice model or program to not include racial and ethnic identity development as core to their framework. Neither will it be acceptable to center the experience of foster care

above all other identities our students hold. Our students are experts in their lived experience, they know what they need to help them succeed, and it is our role as practitioners to co-design with them the programming that creates space for the fullness of our students' identities to be supported and engaged. We are stewards of resources that can promote healing and belonging, we must hold ourselves accountable to ensure that those resources meet every student exactly where they are at and honors the whole of who they are.

A Call to Advocates and Policymakers

Our current political climate has created challenges that in many ways prevent the ability to center our Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students with experience in foster care in policy change. However, there will always be windows of opportunity if we are willing to consider what we can do at every level. Our postsecondary education institutions can change their SAP policies for Pell Grant eligible students, these are not governed by federal statue. We can work with our state child welfare agencies to change how SAP policies implemented for the Education Training Voucher. We can look to long standing policy examples from California for how to expand resources and more recent wins in Minnesota and Mississippi where they have passed policies providing new funding specifically to support students with experience in foster care to reach their educational goals. Most critical in all our advocacy and policymaking action is the centering and inclusion of the voices of our students. We must create policy solutions and develop plans for effective policy implementation with them not for them. As advocates we know that when a student speaks in state legislative briefings and meetings with college and university leadership, people listen and it is time to create more space for students to speak. It is their stories that will compel people toward action, and it is their vision for change that we need to advocate for.

Conclusion

In a field of researchers, practitioners, and advocates who work between the complex systems of education and child welfare, we have researched and discovered practices that now shape the field, created campus support programs, implemented statewide collective impact initiatives, advocated for and passed policies that have removed barriers once thought immovable,. Through collaboration and co-design, we have learned and continue to learn how to ground this work in the lived experience of the students we serve. It is because of this that I know we can create a new vision where students have choice, option, and resources to support along their education journey and where education success is a guaranteed right for 100% of students with experience in foster care.

Declarations

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