From Foster Care to College: The Role of Student Affairs Practitioners in Addressing the

Challenges Foster Youth Face in Accessing Higher Education

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Abstract

For years, the number of former foster youth in the United States has grown while the number of former foster youth enrolled and graduating from higher education institutions continues to be disproportionately lower than that of their non-foster youth peers. The disparity in college-going rates is a result of the unique challenges that many former foster youth face in accessing and persisting in higher education. These challenges include the residual effects of the foster care experience, being an unseen population, lacking preparation for college, barriers to meeting essential needs, and navigating the intersection of multiple minority identities. This paper considers how student affairs professionals can minimize the challenges former foster youth encounter in pursuing higher education through the development of an increased understanding and acknowledgement of the unique needs and lived experiences of foster youth. This paper also offers recommendations for the implementation and improvement of services and programs to support former foster youth in accessing and persisting in higher education.

Keywords: foster youth, foster care, education, college, access, persistence, programs

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Each year, the number of former foster youth in the United States grows as foster youth

are mandated by policy to transition out of foster care to independent adulthood at the age of 18.

All too often, foster youth transition to adulthood with few resources and little-to-no information

about opportunities within higher education. With over 20,000 foster youth transitioning to

adulthood each year and over 300,000 youth between the ages of 18 and 25 having spent a year

or more in foster care after the age of 13, former foster youth have the potential to make up a

sizeable portion of the student body at higher education institutions (Wolanin, 2005).

Although there is great potential for foster youth to be a large subpopulation in higher

education, the current reality is that former foster youth do not attend college at the same rate as

their non-foster youth peers (Wolanin, 2005). One study estimated that non-foster youth enroll in

higher education at a rate six times that of former foster youth and that only 20% of those foster

youth who graduate high school go on to attend college compared with 60% of their non-foster

youth peers (Wolanin, 2005). Furthermore, the percentage of foster youth who persist and go on

to graduate from college is very low with estimates that around 3% of former foster youth

graduate with a bachelor's degree (Pecora et al., 2005) compared to 24.4% of the general

population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Wolanin (2005) found that if former foster youth, ages

18 to 25, attended college at the same rate as their non-foster youth peers, that there would be at

least 100,000 more foster youth enrolled in higher education institutions across the United States.

Understanding the Disparity

There are several reasons for the disparity in college-going rates between former foster

youth and their non-foster youth peers. Primarily, former foster youth face a number of unique

challenges in accessing and persisting in higher education. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the residual effects of the foster care experience, being an unseen population, lacking preparation for college, barriers to meeting essential needs, and navigating the intersection of multiple minority identities. If faced alone, each of these challenges could be detrimental to any student pursuing higher education, but when foster youth face these challenges in combination with little support or resources, the burden can be too much to bear. Furthermore, although there are some programs in place to support foster youth to pursue higher education, the efforts are oftentimes uncoordinated and ineffective in addressing the challenges former foster youth face.

<div align="center">**Implications of the Disparity**</div>

There are several repercussions to individuals, society, and universities that result from foster youth being underserved in higher education. It is important to address the implications this disparity has on constituents to understand the urgency of addressing the inequalities.

Impact on the Individual

At the individual level, lacking a college degree is detrimental to the ability of former foster youth to lead a financially stable life. According to the 2006 U.S. Census, those with a bachelor's degree earned an average of $56,000 annually in comparison to an average of $31,000 annually for those who only had a high school diploma. In addition, one study found that one third of former foster youth are living at or below the poverty level, which is a rate three times that of the national poverty rate and that former foster youth receive public cash assistance at a rate five times that of the general population (Pecora et al., 2006a). Due to their earnings often being below the poverty line (Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009), many former foster youth are unable to meet living expenses, lack health care, become homeless, encounter unemployment, or experience incarceration (Pecora, et al., 2006a; Reilly, 2003).

Impact on Society

The related impact on society is that instead of proactively spending funding to support former foster youth to pursue higher education, substantially more funding is being used retroactively to address the effects of this population being underserved in higher education settings (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Schelbe, 2011). In addition, the societal economic impacts include a prediction that by 2018 the United States will under-produce college graduates by approximately 3 million, yet the fastest-growing occupations will be those that require a college degree (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). With the lack of support former foster youth receive to attend college, the United States is jeopardizing not only the life satisfaction and productivity of former foster youth but is also undermining the workforce and the economy. Lastly, the low college attendance rates of former foster youth often results in the voices of former foster youth being silenced within higher education settings and in larger societal and political discourse. This is especially problematic when those who have the privilege and power of obtaining a higher education degree are making decisions about policies that affect foster youth.

Impact on Higher Education Institutions

The low rate of college attendance and graduation among former foster youth should be a prominent concern for higher education institutions. One study found that former foster youth who do attend college are more likely than non-foster youth to attend full-time, to go to a 4-year institution, and to be engaged with campus programs and resources (Davis, 2006). In this way, former foster youth are the epitome of the engaged student population that institutions desire, but for unknown reasons those former foster youth who do attend higher education are more likely to drop out (see Figure 1) or remain in college for over six years (see Table 1) than their non-foster youth peers (Davis, 2006). The low rate of college attendance among former foster youth also

has a significant impact on higher education institutions as it undermines the mission and goals of higher education institutions to serve the public and private good as they seek to prepare citizens for society, the masses for employment, and individuals for social and financial advancement (Labaree, 1997). In addition, it has become necessary and commonplace for higher education institutions to champion diversity as part of their mission statements and to take efforts to increase the enrollment and retention of diverse students (Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005a) the small percentage of former foster youth presently enrolled in higher education have very different characteristics than the general student population, specifically in regards to the characteristics of ethnicity and age (see Table 1). In this way, higher education institutions are falling short of their commitment to diversity by underserving former foster youth, as they are a very diverse group with over 60% identifying as an ethnic minority in comparison to just 30% of the general population (Davis, 2006). Furthermore, similar to the experiential diversity argument utilized in *Grutter v. Bollinger,* higher education institutions are missing out on the multitude of ways that former foster youth could enrich the classroom environment by sharing their unique experiences and perspectives with their non-foster youth peers. This relates to the concept presented by Dall'Alba (2012) who asserts that it is part of the role of higher education to create ethically aware and socially responsible citizens. Dall'Alba (2012) argues that higher education should promote that students develop a capacity to care for one another through academic and social activities.

The Call to Action for Student Affairs Professionals

At higher education institutions across the nation, student affairs professionals have exhibited a responsibility to promoting social justice and a commitment to advocating for underrepresented and underserved students. However, it can be difficult for student affairs

professionals to effectively carry out this mission of social justice and advocacy if they are

unfamiliar with components of a student's identity or if they are lacking critical knowledge about

the obstacles a student is facing. For this reason, it is essential for student affairs professionals to

gain an increased understanding of the unique challenges that foster youth face as they pursue

higher education. Furthermore, it is especially important to consider how student affairs

professionals can minimize the challenges foster youth encounter by developing an increased

understanding and acknowledgement of the unique needs and lived experiences of former foster

youth. Ultimately, increased empathy for the experiences of foster youth can lead to the

development and improvement of effective services and programs that higher education

institutions can offer to help empower foster youth to access and persist in higher education.

From the Lens of a Former Foster Youth Turned Student Affairs Practitioner

My interest in learning more about the challenges former foster youth face in pursuing

higher education and understanding the role of student affairs practitioners in minimizing such

challenges is the result of my experience as a former foster youth and my decision to pursue a

career in student affairs. As a former foster youth I have experienced first-hand some of the

issues discussed in this paper. Despite facing several hard-to-overcome barriers and having some

unique needs, I was fortunate to have excellent mentors and university personnel in my life who

were essential to my success throughout my undergraduate and graduate education. I also

benefited immensely from the coordinated offering of programs and services that were the result

of intentional collaboration between the university and the government. Although I am blessed to

have had an ultimately positive experience transitioning out of foster care, I recognize that the

experience of many former foster youth is starkly different. I personally witnessed my fellow

foster care alumni, as they had an agonizing experience transitioning out of foster care to higher

education. Sadly, I witnessed many of them attempt to enroll at universities without success while I saw others drop out within months of their degree completion. My personal experience and the exposure I had to the circumstances of my peers has shaped my role as a student affairs practitioner and my commitment to improving educational outcomes for former foster youth.

Integration of Relevant Courses

Beyond my experience as a former foster youth and my role as a student affairs practitioner, I have been exposed to material that is relevant to this topic in several of the courses I have taken in the Educational Leadership & Policy M.Ed Program. I will highlight three specific courses that provided me with the essential knowledge that inspired me to pursue this topic and shaped my understanding of the pertinent issues. First, the Contemporary Issues in Higher Education Policy course provided me with an opportunity to explore relevant policies that influence admissions, financial aid, and student services at higher education institutions. As a result, for the final course project I began my first formal analysis of policies impacting former foster youth in their pursuit of higher education. Secondly, the College Student Retention Theory course introduced me to the concepts of persistence and retention and the factors influencing the enrollment and degree completion of students. The course assignments also helped me consider how various programs and services can be purposefully implemented to improve the retention of specific student populations, such as former foster youth. Lastly, the Group or Individual Intervention in Higher Education course provided me with information about the mental health and emotional needs of students as well as the various support resources available. The course also emphasized the role of practical wisdom and the necessity for student affairs practitioners to develop a capacity to empathize and care for the students they work with. All of the courses in my academic program have influenced me on a personal and professional

level. The knowledge and experiences I have taken from my courses has shaped my passion for this topic and has significantly impacted all aspects of this paper, from my literature review to my proposed recommendations.

Literature Review of the Challenges Former Foster Youth Face

As I learned through personal experience, related coursework, and a review of relevant literature, foster youth face a number of challenges in accessing and persisting in higher education. As stated previously, these challenges include residual effects of the foster care experience, being an unseen population, lacking preparation for college, barriers to meeting essential needs, and navigating the intersection of multiple minority identities. Although these challenges are presented separately, it is important to identify throughout this paper the complexity and interconnectedness of these issues, to consider the systematic barriers that are behind the unique challenges foster youth face in their pursuit of higher education and to consider the ways that student affairs practitioners can acknowledge these challenges.

Lack of Preparation for College

Despite research that has demonstrated that the majority of foster youth aspire to go to college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004), foster youth are severely underrepresented in higher education settings (Davis 2006; Pecora et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2006a;Wolanin, 2005). One research study reported that 80% of the foster youth who participated wanted to attend college or a post-secondary training program (Courtney, et al., 2004). Despite the desire of former foster youth to continue their education after high school, their rates of college enrollment are strikingly low. For example, Wolanin (2005) found that only 20% of foster youth who graduated high school went on to attend college compared with 60% of their non-foster youth peers. This disparity is first evident at high school graduation as one study found that 50% of foster youth

complete high school by the age of 18, compared to 70% of their non-foster youth peers (Wolanin, 2005).

Furthermore, among the foster youth who attend college, the percentage of foster youth who go on to graduate from college is also very low (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Estimates show that around 3% of foster youth graduate with a bachelor's degree (Pecora et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2006a) compared to 24.4% of the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Remedial education. The disparity in college attendance of foster youth is likely due in part to a systematic lack of preparation for college attendance that begins with the K-12 system. For example, one study found that over 50% of foster youth in college were required to take remedial level courses that did not count towards degree completion (Dowsky & Perez, 2010). The need for remedial education is often the result of foster youth being tracked out of college preparatory classes (Dowsky & Perez, 2010), changing primary and secondary schools frequently due to foster care placement changes (Pecora et al., 2005), experiencing out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Courtney et al., 2004), or having a learning disability (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). One study found that foster youth lose 4 to 6 months worth of education every time they change primary or secondary school (Wolanin, 2005). These circumstances also result in foster youth being more likely than their peers to repeat a grade (Pecora, et al., 2005). The educational experience of foster youth in the K-12 system can have a significant influence on their ability to graduate from high school and successfully complete a college degree.

Residual Effects of the Foster Care Experience

After spending years in foster care, many former foster youth experience negative residual effects from their time in care. The residual effects of foster care that influence the

ability of former foster youth to pursue higher education can be the result of a forced transition to adulthood, lingering mental illness, or animosity toward the foster care system.

Forced transition. Each year, over 20,000 youth age out of foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Most youth are mandated by policy to transition out of the foster care at the age of 18 (Blome, 1997). Although the word transition may seem to imply a gradual shift from being a foster youth to an independent adult, the shift is often all but gradual. Emancipation from the foster care system typically occurs on a youths' 18th birthday, regardless of whether they are prepared for independence (Blome, 1997). For foster youth aging out of the child welfare system, their 18th birthday means an immediate end to housing, health insurance, case management, financial security, and caring adult connections (Okypch, 2012). Between the mandated disengagement from services and the preexisting childhood trauma, these youth are at a severe disadvantage, in regards to their aspirations of achieving educational success and corresponding financial stability (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Stigmas and microaggressions. Although there are some government programs that provide resources to foster youth, many of these programs go underutilized due to the hesitancy of current and former foster youth to affiliate with services provided by the foster care system (Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). Research has found that desire to not affiliate with the foster care system is due to the stigma associated with being a foster youth (Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009) as well as the belief that the system is the problem (Collins, 2004). The stigma associated with being a foster youth is perpetuated by microaggressions—a term that was coined by Chester Pierce (1969) to describe the commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental inequities that communicate hostility. As a former foster youth I experienced microaggressions when I would disclose my experience in the foster care system and receive

responses from people who would ask what I did to be placed in foster care, ask if I thought I would be abusive to my children, or ask how I turned out so "normal." Such microaggressions can lead former foster youth to choose to disassociate entirely from the foster care system to the detriment of their ability to receive foster youth specific resources.

Challenges Facing an Unseen Population

A significant challenge facing former foster youth in the access and persistence of higher education is that they are an unseen population. The fact that the identity of foster youth remains unknown until the individual chooses to disclose leads to issues regarding when foster youth have the opportunity to self-identify and the assumptions that foster youth have family support.

Self-identifying. One of the largest challenges facing former foster youth is that their identity can go unseen until they self-identify (Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). Furthermore, foster youth are rarely given the opportunity to self-identify and when they do identify they face the challenge of addressing the stigma associated with the label of foster youth (Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). One of the few occasions in which foster youth have the opportunity to self-identify is on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Wells & Zunz, 2009). As of 2009, the FAFSA updated their dependency questions to ask, "When you were age 13 or older, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent/ward of the court?" (Federal Student Aid, 2012). This is a positive change from the FAFSA application in years prior that asked "Are you an orphan, or were you a ward/dependent of the court?" (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). There is a very negative connotation associated with the word orphan, and it was not uncommon for foster youth to answer the question incorrectly because they did not identify with the word orphan since their biological parents were still living or they did not know what it meant to be a ward/dependent of the court. Although the revised

question that FAFSA implemented in 2009 is an improvement, as it does not use the stigmatizing label of orphan and it includes the term fosters care, it is still a very confusing question as it aggregates three very different populations in a single lengthy question. While providing foster youth with the opportunity to identify on the FAFSA is ultimately positive, it often results in the financial aid office at an institution being the only entity on the campus that is aware of the student's identity as a foster youth (Wells & Zunz, 2009). Due to privacy considerations as well as the lack of processes for sharing identity information, financial aid offices rarely pass the names of former foster youth to other campus programs or resources (Wells & Zunz, 2009).

Assumed family privilege. Another challenge in being an unseen population is that universities maintain a systematic assumption that all students have some kind of a family structure that will provide a level of resources whether that is in the form of social emotional support, college knowledge, or help meeting essential needs. Seita (2001) coined the term *family privilege* to describe the often-unnoticed benefits that stem from being a member of a stable family. Sieta (2001) described these benefits as being embraced by feelings of belonging, safety, and unconditional love. For some students, including foster youth, the assumption that there is a family system to provide support is incorrect (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2011). The assumption of family privilege leads colleges to expect the same or more from foster youth in comparison to their non-foster youth peers, without addressing the unique circumstances foster youth face in pursuing a degree. For instance, Blome (1997) asserts that professionals expect a higher level of functioning from foster youth than parents would expect of their own children as she states:

      It is a curious reality that society's most vulnerable youth, those who have suffered

      abuse or neglect and have never known consistent, permanent, nurturing adult

      relationships, are asked to be self-sufficient at a time when other youth are still

receiving parental support in college or are experimenting with their first job from

within the safe confines of a family. (p.42)

Blome's (1997) understanding that foster youth are not afforded the same opportunities as their

non-foster youth peers makes the argument that foster youth should have access to similar

support and resources to obtain an equitable experience to that of their non-foster youth peers.

Barriers to Meeting Essential Needs

An insufficient support system also contributes to the difficulty foster youth experience in

accessing higher education as they do not have access to the same resources to meet their basic

needs as their non-foster youth peers do. Unfortunately, as noted by Davis (2006), most

universities do not recognize how the lived experiences of former foster youth influences their

ability to enroll or persist in higher education. Former foster youth experience barriers in meeting

basic needs such as housing, transportation, household supplies, and economic stability.

Affordable housing. The need for safe and affordable housing is an under-addressed

need that former foster youth struggle to meet. One study suggested that former foster youth fear

graduation from college because the process makes former foster youth feel as though they are

being emancipated from the foster care system all over again because they do not know if they

will have a place to live (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). A couple of other studies also

documented the need for stable housing for former foster youth and have predicted that having

access to secure and affordable housing may result in positive educational outcomes for former

foster youth (Collins, 2001; Collins, 2004; Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). For

those former foster youth who are able to secure housing, they still encounter struggles in

obtaining critical household items such as food, dishes, and cleaning supplies due to a lack of

financial resources (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006a).

Reliable transportation. Many former foster youth are in need of reliable transportation to attend college or to get to a job that pays for their education. It is not uncommon for former foster youth to lack access to reliable transportation, whether it is because public transportation is not available or is not affordable, or they are unable to purchase a vehicle of their own due to the cost, lack of a co-signer, or lack of knowledge of the car ownership process (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). Furthermore, many foster youth leave the foster care system without a driver's license, which severely limits their transportation options (Pecora et al., 2006a).

Access to health care. A need that is often understated and ignored is former foster youth's need for health insurance and mental health resources (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Lovitt & Emerson, 2008; Pecora et al., 2006a; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2011; Wolanin, 2005). When many youth transition out of foster care they loose the government provided health insurance and are no longer able to maintain the physical and mental health services they require. In regards to some of the counseling and mental health needs that former foster youth have, it is common for former foster youth to experience extreme anxiety about attaining their goals and leaving behind their past even though they have a strong desire to achieve their goals (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Some former foster youth may feel as though they do not have the right to achieve their goals (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010) as they experience survivors' guilt (Wells & Zunz, 2009) and become accustomed to a constant state of loss (Geenen & Powers, 2007). It is well documented that a hierarchy of needs exists and that primary needs such as health must be addressed before energy can be focused on other tasks such as education (Kitzrow, 2003). In this way, the unmet physical and mental health needs of former foster youth impair their ability to focus on their education and achieve academic success.

Economic stability. Upon emancipation from foster care many foster youth lack critical financial resources such as cash, a checking account, or a credit card (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In addition, many former foster youth struggle to find employment while pursuing higher education. Former foster youth are often placed in a situation similar to the single mothers discussed in Shaw's (2004) feminist analysis of welfare reform, in which they must choose between going to college or making ends meet. According to Okpych (2012), although foster youth may want to go to college to gain skills to obtain a higher paying job in a growing market, it is difficult to make the decision to go to college and forgo employment.

Intersection of Multiple Minority Identities

There are several challenges facing foster youth who experience multiple minority identities. For example, former foster youth are more likely to have a learning disability (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010) or be diagnosed with a mental illness (Hines et al., 2005). The additive effects of the interaction between multiple minority identities can lead to further disparities in the educational outcomes of former foster youth. The interaction between multiple minority identities is well documented for African American foster youth.

African American and a foster youth. The experiences of Whites in foster care vary significantly from the experiences of African Americans or other racial minorities in foster care. For example, foster youth of color are more likely to face additional struggles such as racism and prejudice (Schelbe, 2011) and experience additional educational inequalities such as those detailed below (Zwick, 2007; Chang, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2011). Whether in foster care or not, African Americans are at a disadvantage educationally due to separate and unequal schooling (Yun & Moreno, 2006). The educational situation for African American foster youth only becomes further exacerbated as the inequities of being a person of color and a foster youth

intersect, and interfere further with their education. For example, Harris, et al., (2009) found that among former foster youth, African Americans fared worse than Whites on the following measures: income at or below the poverty level, income three times the poverty level, and owning a home or apartment. One of the contributing factors of the decreased financial stability of African American former foster youth in comparison to White former foster youth, was that African Americans were more likely to have a GED than a high school diploma and it is well documented that a GED in comparison to a high school diploma is associated with lower earnings and employment rates (Harris, et al., 2009). The consideration of multiple minority identities is important and it is essential to ensure that former foster youth are receiving support and resources in a holistic manner, including each of their unique identities.

Implications of the Literature

Understanding the unique needs of former foster youth is the first step student affairs practitioners can take in mitigating the issues of access and persistence for former foster youth in higher education. Based on the challenges reviewed in the literature review it is apparent that foster youth are arguably one of the most disadvantaged and underrepresented populations in higher education. Unfortunately, most higher education institutions are not adequately prepared to provide the necessary programs and services to address the unique social, emotional, health, living, and academic needs of former foster youth (Emerson, 2006). As stated by Davis (2006) "now is the time for college and university administrators to develop national interventions to help more of these young men and women to acquire the same higher education opportunities as their non-foster youth counterparts" (p. 37). It is necessary for student affairs practitioners, with their role as advocates for underserved and underrepresented students, to lead the charge to implement and improve programs and services for former foster youth on university campuses.

Theoretical Considerations

As student affairs practitioners seek to implement and improve programs and services for former foster youth on university campuses it is important to consider Brofenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1977) as it offers a model for considering the interaction that takes place between a person and their surrounding environment (see Figure 2). As described by Harris et al. (2009), in the case of former foster youth, Brofenbrenner's Theory allows for the consideration of personal characteristics, past experiences, as well as the current context to identify protective factors such as involvement with campus resources, and risk factors, such as a preexisting mental health issues. Brofenbrenner's Theory can be used as a model to consider what risk factors former foster youth may have and how those risk factors could be offset in the campus environment by protective factors such as support programs and services geared toward former foster youth.

Recommendations for the Implementation and Improvement of Programs and Services

By utilizing Brofenbrenner's Theory student affairs practitioners can offset some of the challenges discussed in the literature review by creating support programs and services for former foster youth that match their specific needs. The recommendations I have for the implementation and improvement of programs and services is based on the conclusions of Davis (2006) made in "College Access, Financial Aid, and College Success for Undergraduates from Foster Care."

Access

As the rates of college enrollment are strikingly low among former foster youth it is necessary to consider the improvements that can be made to programs and services that will increase access for this population. Access to higher education can be improved for former

foster youth by student affairs practitioners making efforts to involve foster youth in existing

outreach programs, creating an educational pipeline with the K-12 system, advocating for the use

of non-cognitive variables in admissions, and increasing awareness of financial aid resources.

Invitation to existing outreach programs. Foster youth should receive special

invitations to ensure that they are not overlooked to participate in existing outreach programs,

such as TRIO programs and College Goal Sunday, that are targeted toward first generation, low

income, underserved students.

Partnerships with K-12. Universities can further increase their partnership with the K-

12 system to identify foster youth so that positive messages regarding higher education and

information on programs for foster youth can be disseminated in a coordinated fashion.

Use non-cognitive variables in admissions. Since foster youth are more likely to have

lower GPAs and test scores due to the residual effects of being in foster care, admissions

practices should allow for the consideration of life experiences and the ability of foster youth to

contribute to a diverse campus community. Traits that are related to the educational success of

foster youth, such as resiliency, goal setting, and the use of resources should also be considered.

Financial aid resources. As foster youth do not have the guidance or support of family

when it comes to funding higher education it is imperative that foster youth receive information

regarding financial aid resources that can offset the cost of tuition. In addition, foster youth

should receive scholarship opportunities that cover tuition and non-tuition expenditures related to

attending college so they can have access to funding that can be used for transportation, food,

housing, and other basic necessities. Lastly, as the language on the FAFSA changes ever year,

student affairs practitioners should work with foster youth to make sure they are familiar with the

language of the FAFSA questions so that they receive all of the funding they are eligible for.

Comprehensive Program for Enrolled Foster Youth

Student affairs practitioners should create a comprehensive program for foster youth

enrolled in higher education as a method of offering coordinated support and resources to

encourage persistence to degree completion.

Program coordinator. A full-time program coordinator should be placed in charge of

the program and should be responsible for helping foster youth transition to the university

setting. The program coordinator would be responsible for notifying offices of the student's

status as a foster youth and for connecting the foster youth with resources such as mentors,

advising, tutoring, involvement opportunities, life skills courses, scholarships, career planning,

and general assistance navigating the overall university system.

On-campus housing and employment. Student affairs practitioners should look into

creating a community within the residence halls for foster youth where they can develop

connections with other foster youth. The residence hall community should provide housing

scholarships, and should remain open during university breaks and holidays so that the former

foster youth have a stable place to live. In addition, foster youth should be encouraged to apply

for student leadership opportunities such as positions that provide room and board compensation.

Offer proactive health resources. Student affairs practitioners should place an

emphasis on effective coping mechanisms and should encourage and provide opportunities for

the use of health resources for the purposes of prevention. It would be ideal if foster youth could

receive low cost or free counseling services and if caps on the number of counseling sessions

could be waived along with fees at student health and wellness centers.

Track college access and success. One distinct role of the program coordinator would be

to conduct needs assessments and evaluations of the satisfaction of foster youth with the existing

programs and services. The program coordinator would conduct surveys when foster youth enter

and depart the institution so that data can be used for reporting and improvement purposes.

Educate to reduce microaggressions. Another important role of the program

coordinator would be to train university personnel on topics relating to foster youth and to

increase an awareness of the foster care system and the unique needs of foster youth. The

program coordinator would help the campus community avoid hurtful language such as orphan,

ward of the state, juvenile justice, delinquent, and welfare system and focus on positive language

to create a safe environment for foster youth where they can develop a healthy self-image.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that existing programs and services are not effectively meeting

the needs of former foster youth and that a better understanding of the unique needs and lived

experiences of former foster youth is necessary to offer more purposeful and coordinated

resources to support the educational success foster youth. As stated by Davis (2006), "a series of

systematic changes need to occur at institutions of higher learning to ensure the needs of

undergraduates from foster care are being recognized and fulfilled before and after they are

admitted" (p. 33). Given the role of student affairs practitioners to advocate and serve

underrepresented student populations it is necessary for student affairs professionals to learn

more about former foster youth so that higher education initiatives can be structured in a way

that will encourage the successful participation of former foster youth. In closing, it is essential

for student affairs practitioners to not only understand the unique needs of former foster youth

but to recognize that for those former foster youth who do attend higher education, the university

campus becomes their home and the faculty, staff, and students become their family (Davis,

2006).

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Figure 1

Primary Reasons Cited by Foster Youth and Non-foster Youth for Leaving
Postsecondary Education Programs Without a Degree or Certificate*

*Includes undergraduates who entered postsecondary institutions in Fall 1995 and left their
institutions without completing a degree or certificate program on or before Fall 2001.

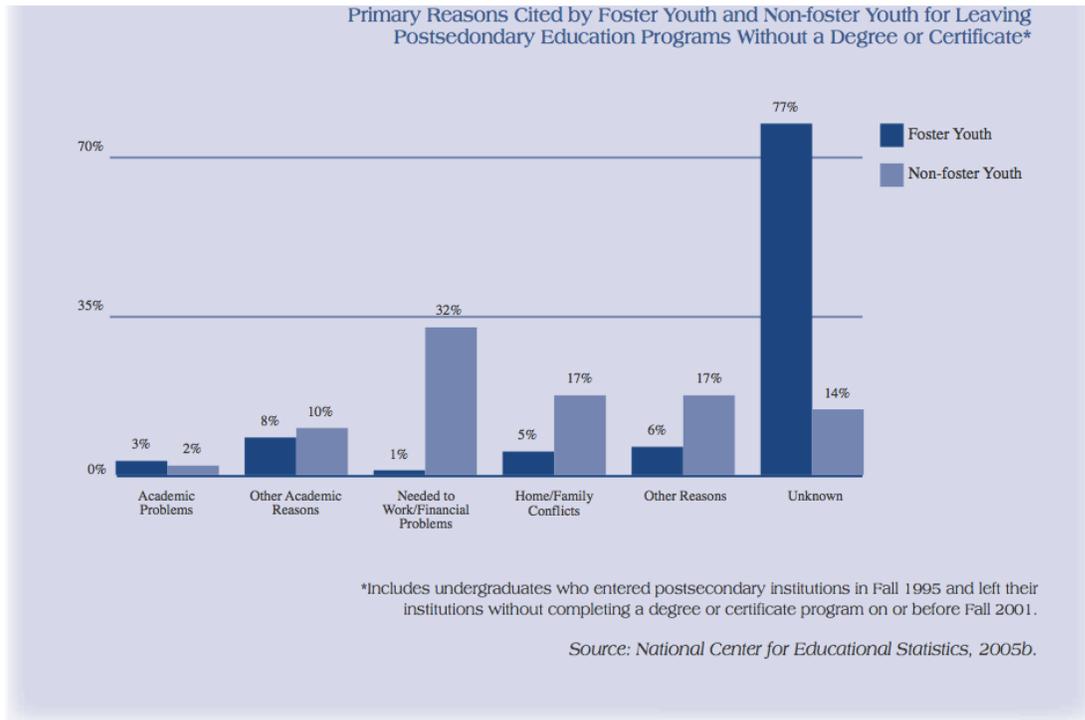Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005b.

Figure 1. Reasons for former foster youth leaving postsecondary education programs before

degree completion in comparison to reasons for non-foster youth leaving postsecondary
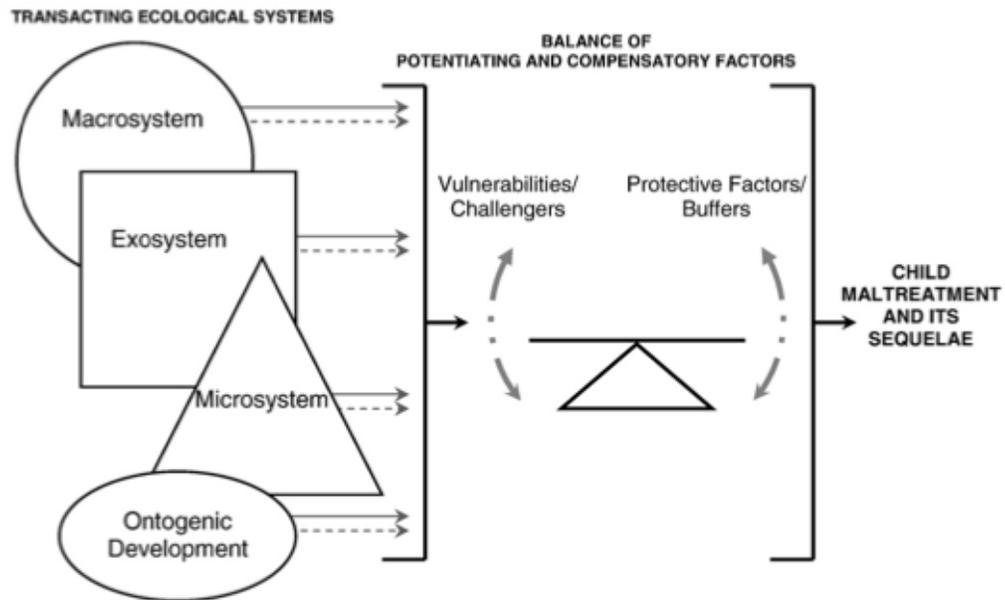
education programs before degree completion.

Figure 2

Figure 2. Brofenbrenner's Ecological Theory demonstrating the ecological systems that interact

with the vulnerable and protective factors in the life of a former foster youth.

Table 1

Six-year Persistence and Degree Attainment Levels for Foster Youth Undergraduates and Non-foster Youth Undergraduates Who First Entered Higher Education in 1995

	Foster Youth	Non-Foster Youth
Attained a Degree or Certificate	26%	56%
Left School With a Degree or Certificate	53%	31%
Still Enrolled (But Have Not Attained a Degree or Certificate)	22%	12%

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005b.

Note. The disparity of six-year persistence and degree attainment levels of former foster youth in comparison to non-foster youth is demonstrated by a larger percentage of non-foster youth graduating with a degree in comparison to former foster youth and a larger percentage of former foster youth persisting to the sixth-year in comparison to non-foster youth.

Table 2

Demographics Characteristics of Foster Youth Undergraduates and Non-foster Youth Undergraduates	Foster Youth	Non-foster Youth
Gender		
Male	54%	58%
Female	46%	42%
Race/Ethnicity		
White, Non-Hispanic	51%	63%
Black, Non-Hispanic	25%	14%
Hispanic/Latino	18%	13%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%	5%
Other	4%	5%
Age Levels*		
Less than 19	38%	22%
19 to 24	62%	39%
25 and Older	+	39%

+ Less than 1%
*Students' ages as of December 31, 2003

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005a.

Note. The demographic diversity of former foster youth who pursue higher education is demonstrated by the larger percentage of former foster youth undergraduates who are ethnic minorities and are under the age of 24 in comparison to non-foster youth undergraduates.