



NRC-FAHE: National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education

WELCOME!

The National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education (NRC-FAHE) is a network of researchers and practitioners whose aim is to improve practice and influence policy related to foster care youth/alumni and higher education by creating and advancing a clear research agenda and facilitating communication and collaboration among interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners to promote postsecondary access and retention of youth in care and foster care alumni. The NRC-FAHE promotes innovative ways to use research and best practices to inform and influence policy making and values practice-informed research and the voice of youth in care and foster care alumni in improving access and outcomes in higher education.

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Welcome and Introduction

I am proud to share the 6th issue of the National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education newsletter with you. In this issue Dr. Kearney provides a summary of the lessons learned from the 1st annual cross-disciplinary foster care research conference that was held in Feb. 2020. We are also highlighting the great work of the Embark program at the University of Georgia from both a programmatic and youth perspective, and the recent publication of Dr. Barbara Tobolowsky and colleagues from the University of Texas Arlington, entitled "Former Foster Youth Experiences with High Education: Opportunities and Challenges" that was published in late 2019 in the journal, Children and Youth Services Review.

Also featured in this newsletter are the latest policy developments occurring at the state and federal levels that impact our work. As you will note in reading our policy column in this issue, COVID 19 has had a disproportionately negative impact on our students, and there is a lot you all can do to help ensure these disparities are rectified. As always, we encourage all of you to be active participants in sharing your research and expertise with your elected officials and to do our part in ensuring that legislation that impacts college enrolled foster alumni is informed by the best practice research we have all worked so hard to produce.

As a reminder, our speakers program is organized by Dr. Amy Salazar; and information about past and future webinars can be found on our website at (<https://www.nrc-fahe.org/archive-webinars>).

We would like to thank our colleagues from Florida International University who presented their latest research on our most recently scheduled webinar held on May 4, 2020 to share lessons learned from the Fostering Panther Pride program.

If you miss a webinar, don't fret. All presentations are recorded and available on our website. If you are interested in being a featured speaker for a future webinar, please contact Amy at amysal3@myuw.net

In solidarity,
Angelique Day

ANGELIQUE DAY, Ph.D.



Angelique Day, PhD, MSW, is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington-Seattle. Much of her research focuses on foster care youth, including examining the differences in college retention rates between foster care youth and other low-income first-generation college students, and examining "youth voice" and its impact on child welfare, education and health policy reform. Dr. Day leads the Policy Review team for the NRC-FAHE. Questions about the policy section of this newsletter can be directed to her.

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Higher Education Column

KERRI KEARNEY, PH.D.



Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D., is an associate professor in Higher Education & Student Affairs. Through her work, she prepares individuals to lead at institutions of higher education or function in related research or policy roles. She teaches and advises students almost exclusively at the doctoral level. Her research, teaching, and service agendas focus on the broad areas of other mothering issues (fostering and adoption) with an emphasis on college students who are alumni of foster care, the role of emotions in human transition, issues related to organizational behavior, and visual or arts-based methodologies in qualitative research.

In previous columns, I spoke to the need for social workers and higher education professionals from a variety of fields to come together to address the needs of college students with histories of foster care and/or homelessness. In this column, I want to dive a little more deeply into the link between higher education research and higher education practice.

Practice is, of course, the piece of higher education that students of all backgrounds interact with including staff, faculty, and administrators whom students meet and are guided by. Even campus practitioners may not always be fully attuned to the research that undergirds much of how things are done in their daily work.

The higher education system is, by its design and history, built upon and refined by guiding research; likewise, it tends to be more responsive to research than some other types of organizations. This doesn't mean that research always leads the way or even keeps up! In the case of former foster youth in college, the research has lagged behind practice. With a decentralized system, diminishing finances, practices of academic freedom, and other issues, creating a national research effort to better inform practice is challenging.

A significant step forward was made in February 2020 when an inaugural conference for research on foster alumni was held in Washington D.C. This conference, called the National Research Conference on Foster Alumni *and other hidden populations*, required attendees to be accepted through a proposal process. Conference size was deliberately kept small. The overarching purpose was to build knowledge and influence practice and policy in support of foster alumni college (and college-bound) students. In the short term, this meant "seeding" the research in the area of foster alumni college students through bringing interdisciplinary researchers into shared space – in other words, attempting to bridge or break down traditional barriers among diverse areas of knowledge.

Conference attendees included 31 researchers and scholar-practitioners who represented 22 universities and 3 related organizations from 15 states. Attendees were from 8 distinct fields of study. Six interdisciplinary research teams were seated and designed new research studies while at the conference. Those studies will be conducted over the 16 months following the conference; presented at a follow up conference in September, 2021, at Oklahoma State University; and then published. Research study topics include:

- Understanding the knowledge, skills, and resources of postsecondary education leaders and staff who serve youth formerly in foster care

(team lead: Jennifer Geiger, PhD, University of Illinois at Chicago)

- How college students with foster care experience develop in college: Seeks to develop an initial framework that affirms/disaffirms pre-existing student development theories (team lead: Lisa Schelbe, PhD, Florida State University)
- Pre-college programming for students with a history of foster care: Seeks to identify models of preparation for post-secondary education and the breadth of programming and stakeholders involved (team lead: Megan Piel, PhD, University of Texas as San Antonio)
- Understanding the extent to which 2- and 4-year public colleges and universities in Texas provide support to former foster youth and lay the groundwork for future study on the impact of campus support services on higher education outcomes (team lead: Toni Watt, PhD, Texas State University)
- Exploring students' pre-college journeys: Includes ACES data matched to institutional data to generate knowledge on a wide variety of student factors that may influence college success (team lead: Kerri Kearney, EdD, Oklahoma State University)

For more information about the 2021 follow up conference, please follow our [webpage](#) or email risforthursday@okstate.edu. Requests for proposals for the conference will be released in Fall 2020.

Program Highlight - University of Georgia

As a special for this issue, we are highlighting the **Embark@UGA** program.

CARRIE SMITH, PHD



Carrie Smith serves as the Assistant Dean of Students for Student Care & Outreach, providing individualized support and assistance to students experiencing hardship circumstances. She oversees general case management within Student Care & Outreach. Additionally, Carrie provides trainings and informational sessions to campus and community partners about working with students of concern and the role of Student Care & Outreach. Carrie also serves as a member of the university's Behavioral Assessment and Response Council (BARC).

Can you give us some background on your program and how it got started?

Embark Georgia was started by the Fanning Institute at the University of Georgia (UGA). Embark was the creation of a statewide network with designated points of contact at all of the institutions in the university system of Georgia, and our technical college system and even some private schools. That network included people who were providing services to students who've experienced foster care or homelessness or who were at risk of homelessness. The Fanning Institute grew to support all of these schools, and about 3.5 years ago they

transitioned Embark Georgia, the campus-based initiative over to Student Care and Outreach with the Assistant Dean of Students. At Student Care and Outreach, we provide individualized assistance and tailored interventions to students who are experiencing complex circumstances - that's anything from "I don't like my academic advisor," to "I'm having some really severe mental health struggles" and making sure they're connected to the right resources at the right time. Fanning has the capacity to support the state, whereas we are really here to support the students at UGA.

When we started, we did a needs assessment and really interviewed students who had been part of Embark and asked what do you want and what do you need? Because I think that's important. So everything that we have done has been a reflection of what students have needed, whether it's getting everybody to dinner, or doing a workshop about a specific life skill, or helping a student who really just wants to be able to go take an internship where everybody else gets to.

How about some background how your program is funded?

My position is the Assistant Dean of Students and this is part of my portfolio. This is the only program run out of Student Care and Outreach. Our funding for the program itself is all privately raised. As far as the manpower, that comes out of UGA Outreach and Student Affairs. But the actual program elements, whether we're treating everyone to dinner or hosting a workshop, we're going out and raising those funds. We've had two amazing champions, one of whom is an alum of UGA and the other who will be a UGA parent come August. But they have been really instrumental in terms of championing fundraising calls and also standing behind the program to get us off the ground with emergency funds and just funds that can be used to support the students in general.

How many students would you say your program serves?

It's kind of hard to capture that number at a place like UGA because it's so difficult to identify students unless they self-identify. Right now, we probably have around 50 students that we are aware of that are part of population, and there are usually 20-25 who are actively engaged in our programming.

What is your role within the program?

I oversee the entire campus-based initiative. I represent Embark and this population specifically when there are issues of diversity being discussed because I am usually the one listening to their voices. I'm also their case manager a lot of the time and I participate directly in fundraising.

Which of your program elements do you feel are the most successful and which would you focus more resources on if you could?

Our individualized case management is done very well. I think we do a really great job of making sure students have people in the offices where they need people. I don't want any Embark students in our program to ever feel like they have to call the main number for financial aid because their situation is a little bit more complex. We have really good campus partners which helps that be really successful, but I also think that's our bread and butter as a larger unit. Our program was awarded the Most Creative Collaboration award by the Higher Education Case Managers Association last year. And I think part of the reason for that is because that idea of de-siloing things is our ethos. There are a lot of wonderful people on college campuses and you've got to figure out who they are. Sometimes maybe it's not the person with the greatest title, maybe it's someone in an office who had this experience themselves. We need to find those people and tap into them because everyone deserves to have a network of support.

I would love to be able to provide more resources to them in terms of their academic requirements. We have an experiential learning requirement for graduation here, and one of the things we've been raising funds for is to be able to have students be engaged with our program a little bit more intentionally. We want to create a program that takes them through their time at UGA that, through participation and engagement, they would be able to apply for an experiential learning grant that would allow them to fulfill that requirement. Most students at UGA choose to do study abroad or get an internship but, as we know, even if you get money to pay for you to study abroad, how can you really enjoy the study abroad if you don't have additional finances to be able to pay for any other experiences there? There are so many internships in places where maybe it's a high cost of living or maybe they're not paid but it would be an incredible experience.

What is the impact of Embark on program participants?

The impact of the program is so different student by student. I think programs that come at it and say "these are the needs of this population" sometimes miss nuances and complexities that are really beautiful about people's lives. What's impactful from a global viewpoint is retention, progress, graduation, right? These are the things we talk about. But for me the impact is a little more nuanced. And our students are our best voices. It says something that they volunteer to fundraise for us without us even having to ask. They care enough to make sure that someone else gets to feel the impact of this program, too.

Last summer a student I had been working with for three years was able to get an internship in Atlanta with a small financial planning company. We were able to give him some money to afford to do that and be comfortable and focused on his work rather than being worried about buying gas to drive. And he went and had an amazing experience and he just accepted a job with a financial company about three weeks

ago. To see that immediate impact has been so amazing.

Another example that comes to mind is a student who was about to do an interview for an international job, and she hadn't been to the dentist in seven years. She finally admitted to us that she could barely sit in her chair because she had impacted gums. She ended up needing all of this oral surgery. We worked really closely with our amazing colleagues in the Office of Student Financial Aid and we were able to pay for her surgery with emergency funds. We also worked with a dental practice here that was willing to do some things at cost. To watch her face when she felt that her university cared that she had teeth, and that she didn't have to be in pain, that impact I think is a little bit less tangible also means so much because it builds trust between a population and an institution that may not have been served well by previous systems.

Which parts of your program do you feel could be replicable to other programs like yours across the country (knowing that some states may not provide as much funding or support as your program may receive)?

One of the things that's free is to harness your university resources. We have a group of people that get together who are from difference schools, colleges, staff, faculty, a hodgepodge of people that we've reached out and identified to be part of a council that meets every other month. The council makes sure that we're all exchanging resources so that we can be proactively supporting one another's programs and building a tailored plan for each student. I think what we do that people could replicate is to stop and say, "who are the student's people?" Who are the three to five people on this campus that we need to talk to this student about and say, listen, we're all behind you and we want to make sure you get there so that if I'm out of town you don't feel alone or abandoned. Maybe I have a student who has recently come out and I want to make sure they've got someone from our LGBTQ resource center who's a person for them. Maybe it ends up that

I'm not the person that they connect with the deepest, but I'm their chief cat herder, and if there's a problem I can say, "I'm going to let your team know because we're not only going to hold you accountable but we're also going to remind you that you can do this."

Do you have one or two specific challenges that you feel your program faces?

Identification. Here at UGA, one of the most obvious places to identify them is on the FAFSA, but that is protected by federal law. So we have some specific communication that our financial aid office sends for us, and tries to encourage the students they meet to reach out to our program.

Another challenge is figuring out how best to market a program like Embark@UGA. There are different students in different places so it's hard to market the program because I just don't know everyone's story.

Are there any specific things (new programs, better outreach, etc.) you would like to see your program achieve in the future?

I'd really like for a student to understand what their journey can be like from beginning to end through Embark. For people to know it's not this one-off service if you need to call somebody, that we really have full wrap around services. We are able to pay student's commitment deposits so they can save their spot at UGA. And at the end, we pay for their graduation regalia and we have a professional photographer who comes in and takes their photographs. We really want students to know we're going to be there on day 1 and then we're going to be with you when you walk across the stage and get your diploma. And if I could figure out a way to sell the program in that way then I would feel like we had really gotten to the place where we could thrive.



Student Highlight – University of Georgia

Adrianna Edwards shares her experience with the **Embark@UGA** program.



**UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA**

What has your experience with Embark@UGA been like? How did you get connected to the program?

My experience with Embark has been great. I got connected with Embark my sophomore year. My adoptive family abandoned me before I got to school, but luckily my Aunt and Uncle made sure I made it to the last orientation and enrolled. They helped me get to college, but they were unable to keep supporting me so after freshman year I was on my own. I had taken on two jobs and subleased an apartment that summer. Although I had a place to stay, I was struggling to get food and I had no car. My friend Shayna told me about the program. I sent them an email explaining my situation, and then I got on a bus and went to meet with David and Lori at the Fanning Institute. That day they sent me home with a duffel bag full of snacks and toiletries, and from there I went to meet with Ms. Carrie. Since then Dr. Carrie and I have been inseparable. I honestly wouldn't have made it through that year without her, because I was seriously thinking of dropping out.

What aspects of the program do you feel were most impactful for you?

I think the best thing about the program is just knowing I truly have someone there for me and that my school actually cares. I don't have regular student problems. Most students are worrying about grades or the next party, I was worried about being homeless and having food in my stomach. Anything that I've ever needed, Dr. Carrie and the Embark program have made happen. When I didn't have food, she made the food pantry available to me. When I didn't have a coat for winter, she found one. When I couldn't pay rent, she helped me find resources through UGA and the community. It really is a spectacular program.

What program elements would you like to see expanded or replicated at other universities?

I honestly think the biggest barrier is finding students. A lot of people that come from these situations aren't very forthcoming. I would love to see the program expanded upon particularly on how they recruit students. I feel like UGA has set the example of what true student care and outreach looks like. I feel like schools should have some kind of retainer for those in need, not just scholarships or academics. Going to college is so much more than going to class. You can't be a good student when life is weighing you down.

What recommendations do you have for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers?

Resources, resources, resources. It's like ok, congratulations... you made it! Now what? I did the work to get to college but now it's up to me as an 18-year-old to figure out how to get through it? I needed financial resources, mentorship, and counseling to be able to push through and get where I am today. I feel like those things are the minimum that students who have been through this kind of trauma deserve. I was fortunate enough to attend a school that provided me all three, but I think all students should have access to those resources.

Policy Updates

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) Work Mandate

The [Families First Coronavirus Response Act \(FFCRA\)](#) temporarily and partially suspended the time limit in the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#), but it did so only for participants under the age of 50 who do not have a dependent child in the home (referred to as Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents or ABAWDs). No other changes were made to work requirements for any other populations or public benefit programs including SNAP, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program or [Medicaid](#), where applicable. This negatively impacts full time college enrolled foster and homeless students.

The Issue: Despite record unemployment rates, Congress left work requirements intact in public programs that help meet the basic needs of millions of people with low incomes, including students.

Even before COVID-19, public benefits programs were a confusing network of rules and administrative requirements that require a litany of verifications to access and maintain eligibility. For example, in December 2018, the U.S. Government Accountability Office issued a report noting that SNAP failed to serve almost [60% of potentially eligible students](#), undermining federal investments in higher education. In the SNAP program students are defined as those who attend an institution of higher education at least half time and who then must meet at least one of 11 exemption categories to be eligible. One

of the most accessed exemptions allows students who worked at least 20 hours a week (on average) to meet the eligibility requirement. Class attendance, credits, or hours do not count toward this requirement. Since the FFCRA does not lift or relax this requirement, students who utilize this exemption and who lost their job due to the pandemic could also lose their SNAP benefits.

While the CARES Act does allow for [some flexibility regarding participation and application requirements](#), the federal agencies that administer public benefit programs were not given the option to eliminate the work requirements other than for ABAWDs in SNAP. Congress should not leave this action to federal agencies or require states to request waivers, thereby creating more work for federal agency workers. A substantial body of empirical evidence shows that administrative burden [reinforces inequality and reduces access to public benefits](#). Congress should rectify this immediately to avoid further harm, especially during a crisis in which the full extent of the COVID-19 has yet to be calculated or felt.

Recommendation: Please contact your elected officials in Congress and asks them to ensure that work requirements are suspended for all public programs in the next COVID-19 congressional response during the public health crisis to improve the ability of people, including at-risk College students, to meet their basic needs.

Moving Forward: The widespread job losses and resulting financial insecurity that is now occurring is causing educational disruptions that will have lasting consequences for our most vulnerable students. There is far too much at stake that requires Congress make effective and inclusive investments to stabilize the economy; dated stereotypes of who today's

students are should not hinder those decisions. Ensuring that stimulus funding reaches our most vulnerable college students is an investment in their continued education, and it is essential to stave off further disparities in their ability to enter the workforce and economy.

Implementation of the CARES Act

The U.S. Department of Education faces a critical and urgent task: implementation of the recently enacted Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, and specifically the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund authorized therein.

Based on the work of our members, we know that students face basic needs insecurity. We therefore offer three considerations for the implementation of the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. The distribution of emergency aid matters a great deal to its efficacy, and there are many common challenges with typical distribution. Therefore, the Department of Education's guidance should:

1. Clarify that higher education institutions should not use the student emergency relief portion to reimburse the institution for expenses that are not explicitly listed in CARES;
2. Ensure that higher education institutions recognize the [flaws in the Higher Education Act definition of cost of attendance](#) and adapt their emergency aid distribution accordingly to meet the real needs of students,
3. Direct higher education institutions to prioritize students with low incomes, parenting students, students of color, and

undocumented students in the aid distribution.

We fully recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting higher education institutions and putting their viability at risk. Foster and homeless students will not succeed in college if their institutions' financial struggles limit the quality and type of support services available or compromise student support staff working conditions. We need your help to urge Congress to provide more resources to institutions in a fourth congressional stimulus package.

But in the meantime, higher education institutions **should not** be permitted to seek reimbursement for student expenses from the student emergency aid portion of CARES. This includes reimbursements for tuition, room and board fees, student activities fees, and parking fees, or other goods and services that were not delivered. However, if an institution provided emergency aid to students by re-allocating institutional dollars needed for other activities, they should be able to use the emergency aid portion for reimbursement. In addition, the purchase of laptops, WiFi devices or other goods or services **provided directly to students** should also be reimbursable.

The CARES Act indicates that students should be provided grants for a "component of their cost of attendance per section 472 of the Higher Education Act." However, this definition of cost of attendance does not **represent the reality of costs for students**. Housing and food costs are often understated, and it fails to account for the costs that parenting students incur, resulting in **high levels of unmet financial need** for students with disproportionate impacts on students who have experience foster care or homelessness. The Department of Education should ensure that the

guidance they provide accounts for the shortcomings in the current calculations of cost of attendance. The guidance the Department issues should reflect modern day costs of living including **housing costs**, food preparation and purchasing that exceed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's **dated formula**, and **child care costs**.

The Department of Education must strike a balance between providing guidance to institutions on which students to target for emergency aid and flexibility. Higher education institutions and leaders will no doubt struggle with picking "winners and losers" when allocating emergency aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to maximize the impact of the dollars to increase the odds of retention and graduation. Moreover, we have extensive evidence that typical indicators such as Pell grant receipt are inadequate proxies for which students face basic needs insecurity. Other factors not given much attention in Department of Education data, including lack of parental support, presence of children in the home, difficulty finding and securing work, and the impact of criminal justice and foster care systems play key roles and must be considered by institutions doing the difficult work of **rationing emergency aid**.

To maximize the impact of the CARE's emergency aid grants on foster and homeless college students, the Department of Education must move quickly. We urge the Department to provide guidance on the matters above and disburse the dollars immediately.

The Pandemic Protection for Transition-age Foster Youth Act

On May 13th the bipartisan Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth (CCFY) introduced in the House the 2020 National Foster Care Month resolution and the **Pandemic Protection for Transition-age Foster Youth Act (aka the Pandemic Protection Act)**.

The CCFY Co-chair's bill protects transition-age foster youth during the COVID pandemic response by allowing young people who are *already* participating in foster care and/or Chafee to continue to be served if they age out during the pandemic response. Congress has defined eligibility for foster care up to age 21. The bill only extends foster care eligibility to the age the state allows. Congress has defined eligibility for Chafee to age 23. Unless Congress acts, any young person who exceeds these statutory age limits during the COVID response is no longer eligible and cannot receive support or services with these funding sources. The bill does not open the programs to otherwise eligible youth over the statutory age limits. The temporary waiver would start as of January 1, 2020 and ends when the COVID emergency declaration ends. *The goal is to make sure young people don't lose their housing, tuition support, or agency/community connections during the pandemic response.*

The agency that administers federal foster care resources, the Children's Bureau, issued program instruction reminding states that have not already taken the option to extend foster care to youth between the ages of 18 and 21 that they can do so. It also creates a very streamlined process for states to extend foster care simply by submitting a certification and some assurances. It reminds states that they have the option to provide extended assistance without regard to the education/work (or medical condition) requirements during

the pandemic response. The program instruction ties these state flexibilities to a Stafford Act emergency declaration.

The Children's Bureau program instruction does not change eligibility for extended foster care or Chafee. This is because Congress sets the eligibility standards by statute. Congress has defined eligibility for extended foster care up to age 21, and Congress has defined eligibility for Chafee to age 23. Unless Congress acts, any young person who exceeds these statutory age limits is no longer eligible and cannot receive support or services with these funding sources.

The Pandemic Protection Act would provide flexibility to states to keep transition-age foster youth in care if they would otherwise have aged out during a declared COVID pandemic emergency. *This has huge implications for foster youth in higher education, who need these supports now more than ever.*

former foster youth are capped at \$5,000 in additional funds. Georgia's program eligibility is slightly broader, including youth who were in foster care at the age of 14 or older. More details about each state's tuition waiver policy can be found at <http://depts.washington.edu/fostered/tuition-waivers-state>.

We know that there may be legislation in your state that we have not listed here. If you know of a specific effort in your state that you would like us to mention in the next newsletter, please email Angelique Day at dayangel@uw.edu

The State of Tuition Waivers

To date, 30 states have passed tuition waivers to increase the accessibility and affordability of higher education for current and former foster youth. Tuition waiver programs generally cover an eligible student's remaining tuition & fees after any other financial aid is dispersed. Pennsylvania, Georgia and Utah are the most recent states to pass tuition waiver legislation, though the program specifics vary. Pennsylvania's law, the Fostering Independence Through Education Act, covers all tuition for youth who were in foster care at the age of 16 or older. Georgia and Utah provide funds through Education and Training Vouchers, which cap the amount of aid a student can receive each year. In Georgia, students can receive up to \$12,500 per year, while in Utah

Article Highlight

In this issue we highlight an article entitled **Former Foster Youth Experiences with High Education: Opportunities and Challenges**. For a complete list of resources, please see the Library tab on our website.

If you would like to have your recent article highlighted, please send us an article summary in this same format to nrc.fah@gmail.com.

About the Authors

BARBARA TOBOLOWSKY, PH.D.



Dr. Barbara Tobolowsky is an associate professor at the University of Texas at Arlington in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department. Her research focuses on the college transitions of unique student populations, including foster alumni, dual credit, and transfer students.

This article was co-written with Maria Scannapieco, The University of Texas at Arlington; Donna Aguiniga, The University of Alaska Anchorage; and Elissa Madden, Baylor University.

Study Summary

This mixed methods study explored the postsecondary experiences of foster alumni from a large southwest urban area who have or were attending college. In phase one, 56 former foster

youth were surveyed about their experiences in and out of care. In phase two, 12 foster care alumni were interviewed to gain a more in-depth understanding of their lives. The final phase consisted of focus groups with 28 key stakeholders, including foster parents, Child Protective Services caseworkers, and community service providers who offer services to youth who have aged out of care, to gain a fuller view of the foster youth experience.

Key Findings

Three main themes emerged: (a) the perceived value of college; (b) the foster alumni's life challenges; and (c) their relationships with others. Many of the foster alumni had received praise for their educational achievements, so it had become a positive part of their identity. As a result, they saw college as a way to forge a better future. Nevertheless, the former foster youth enumerated many challenges they faced in and out of the foster care system that affected their educational journeys. Multiple placements and moves led to inconsistent schooling, which hurt their learning and social connections. The alumni said the system further incapacitated them by making "normal" teen behavior near impossible with the need to follow liability provisions (e.g., requiring background checks if they wished to visit a friend's home). As a result, they felt they were socially backward. In addition, they believed that the K12 personnel assumed negative attitudes about them merely because they were in the foster care system. These negative views fed into their low self-esteem, which also hurt their academic pursuits. Finally, although the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) classes were intended to help foster youth transition out of care, several stakeholders felt they perpetuated dependence rather than independence and they lacked any discussion of college.

The issues did not subside once they got to college. Even though someone from their biological family (41.1%) and/or

someone from their foster family (53%) had attended a postsecondary institution, the alumni participants were unsure what was required of them to matriculate. This lack of knowledge led to missing important deadlines for housing or financial aid, which could lead to interruptions in their studies. Over half also had unreliable transportation and housing during their college years. These challenges were more difficult because the foster alumni did not have personal supports on which to rely. Moreover, the alumni felt re-stigmatized having to speak to numerous staff to attempt to resolve any issue, because no one person seemed to know about resources intended to help them.

Implications

The study confirmed the need for supports to help prepare foster youth for college, such as expanding the PAL classes to cover college expectations and choice. Then, when at the postsecondary institution, the alumni wanted one person, well-versed in the foster youth experience, to assist them with the complexities of the college processes (e.g., registration, advising, and financial aid). Having one contact who understood their experiences would help them feel more comfortable seeking assistance and may help them avoid some of the challenges they faced. Although this study provided a deeper understanding of foster alumni's postsecondary experiences, more research about their educational journeys over time will expose additional challenges that hinder their postsecondary success and identify supports that help them persevere to graduation.

Tobolowsky, B., Scannapieco, M., Aguiniga, D., & Madden, E. (2019). Former foster youth experiences with higher education: Opportunities and challenges. *Children and Youth Services Review, 104*, 10