



# 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.

### Our Leadership:

Angelique Day, PhD  
School of Social Work  
University of Washington

Lisa Schelbe, PhD  
College of Social Work  
Florida State University

Amy M. Salazar, LMSW, Ph.D.  
Department of Human  
Development  
Washington State University  
Vancouver

Kerri Kearney, PhD, MBA  
Higher Education  
& Student Affairs  
Oklahoma State University

Thank you to the students who contributed to the creation of this newsletter:

Angelina Callis, MSWc  
University of Washington

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# Welcome and Introduction

I am proud to share this second issue of the National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education with you. We had great participation at our meeting at the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) conference in San Francisco in January of 2019. Great ideas were shared on how to make the Collaborative best meet the needs of its membership. We have released a formal website (<https://www.nrc-fahe.org/>) where you access information related to upcoming and past webinars, the newsletter archive, and a library that has up to date information on the peer-reviewed research that has been written on the topic of foster care and higher education to date. The website is continuing to evolve. We are working on reorganizing the library to make it easier to search for research by specific topics of interest. We will also be adding a section to the library highlighting technical reports. Another great suggestion that came from the special interest group meeting at SSWR was the importance of including a youth interview in the newsletter. Although we were unable to secure a youth interview in time for the release of this current edition, we are committing to do that for all future newsletter publications.

I want to thank Dr. Sebrena Jackson for kicking-off our first webinar of the series. We had over 60 guests register and listen in! Missed Sebrena's talk? No worries, all talks are being archived and are available for viewing through our Webinar Archive page (<https://www.nrc-fahe.org/archive-webinars/>)! Our upcoming speakers program for the year can be found on our website and are also highlighted in this edition of the newsletter.

In this issue we highlight the University of Alabama's REACH program and the National Social Work Enrichment Program (NSEP). We're also highlighting the recent publication of Nate Okpych and Mark Courtney that

was published in late 2018 in Children and Youth Services Review.

As promised in our inaugural newsletter, we will be using the newsletter to keep you apprised of the latest policy developments occurring at the state and federal levels that impact our work. Legislation that was introduced in 115<sup>th</sup> congress (17-18 legislative session) that was highlighted in the Oct 2018 newsletter that was not signed into law before the New Year will need to be reintroduced, and new bill numbers will be assigned to them. Please reach out to the original bill sponsors of these bills and encourage them to re-introduce these important bills. You can find information on the original bill sponsors below, in the policy section of this newsletter. Additionally, we are asking you to reach out to your congressional members and ask them to sign on as co-sponsors of these bills. Don't know who your elected officials are? Please visit <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials/>.

In solidarity,  
Angelique Day

ANGELIQUE DAY, Ph.D.



Angelique Day received her Ph.D. in interdisciplinary health science in 2011 from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. She earned an MSW from Michigan State University in 2005 and a BS summa cum laude in sociology/psychology from Central Michigan University.

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.

From 2011-2016, she was an assistant professor of social work at Wayne State University, where she taught both undergraduate and graduate classes. She's been an evaluator, principal investigator or project coordinator on major studies funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and McGregor Fund, among others.

Day has received many awards and honors, including a year-long congressional fellowship awarded during the 2016-2017 academic year by the Society for Research on Child Development and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She was assigned to the office of Congressman Danny K. Davis where she helped develop the congressman's child welfare and higher education legislative portfolios.

[dayangel@uw.edu](mailto:dayangel@uw.edu)

# Practice Highlights: The University of Alabama

As a special for this issue, we decided to highlight two programs at the University of Alabama.

M. SEBRENA JACKSON, Ph.D., LCSW



Dr. M. Sebrina Jackson is an Assistant Professor and MSW Program Director in the School of Social Work at The University of Alabama. She is a licensed clinical social worker with over 20 years of social work practice experience. Her research and practice now focus on two primary areas: social work education and youth transitioning from foster care. She founded the National Social Work Enrichment Program (NSEP) to inspire foster youth to graduate high school and attend college. She has presented this work both nationally and internationally. She received the 2009 NASW Georgia Social Worker of the Year Award and the 2017 NASW-Alabama Social Worker of the Year Award for her work with youth transitioning from foster care. She can be reached at: [msjackson5@ua.edu](mailto:msjackson5@ua.edu)

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

Dr. Jackson: Well, my program is called the National Social Work Enrichment Program and we use the acronym NSEP. We really started because I had an interest in providing a summer program experience that introduces youth in a potential career in social work. I have come across so many students who were in college who didn't know about the profession and what we do. At the time, I was living in Georgia, so I approached our State Commissioner and she was also looking for what she called a "meaningful summer experience for her older foster youth." So, we kind of pulled both of those ideas together to develop NSEP. We ran the program in Georgia for a couple of years, but the

majority of the program has happened in the State of Alabama. The program is designed for older foster youth who are rising high school juniors or seniors or recent high school graduates. They have the opportunity to spend six-weeks at the University of Alabama, on the college campus and with a college instructor, while they learn a number of coordinated things while they're with us over the summer.

*How about some background on funding for your program?*

Our funding comes from Alabama Department of Human Resources. I believe they use CHAFEE dollars to help fund the summer program and we treat it like a summer camp, so they can use some of those resources to help with funding. But then we also get some in-kind donations from a variety of sources as well.

*How many youth would you say your program serves?*

On average, each summer we have anywhere from 25-35 students each summer. We try not to get larger than 40 because we really like the fact that they have that one-on-one time. So, on average it's 25-35 youth, depending on funding.

*Can you describe the main components of your summer curriculum for us?*

Our curriculum has four primary components. The first one is college readiness skill development. With that component we really focus on getting the youth ready for college and that includes quite a bit of classroom time over the course of the six-weeks. During that time, youth learn about how they apply for college, how to fund college, the differences between high school and college and things like navigating relationships with roommates. As part of this college readiness component is college visits. Each Thursday of the summer program is our college visit day. So, the youth visit campuses around the

State; nearly 15 colleges over the course of the summer. These are visits to four-year, two-year, and technical colleges.

The second component of the program is employment skill development. We think it's really important, many of the youth who are this age have very little employment experience, and that's really important to their transition to adulthood. We partner with social service agencies and the community, and the youth actually get work experience. Usually this is three whole days a week for youth to learn basic employment skills that they need. They also learn to and create a résumé and they learn some interviewing skills too.

The third component is leadership skill development. This is one area that youth really enjoy. I think they get quite a bit out of it. We partner with Toastmaster's International, the local chapter here, and they provide volunteers that meet with you several hours each week over the course of the six-weeks. They work with the youth on their leadership skill development and their public speaking skills. We found this component of the program has been really important for those youth who go on to become leaders in our State, what we call our Dream Council; the State board which consists of Ambassadors who represent youth transitioning from foster care. So, youth who've been in NSEP and have these leadership skills really do well as ambassadors or board members.

The fourth component of the program is relationship skill development. We partner with our health department to deliver an evidence-based program called Making Proud Choices. They meet with the youth once a week, usually on Fridays, for a half-day to review and discuss the curriculum that works with the youth on the importance of making healthy choices in relationships. This curriculum focuses on sex education, so if youth choose to have sex they know how to protect themselves in terms of using condoms and if they prefer not to have sex then how do they negotiate that with partners.

In addition to those four components we also realize it's important that the youth have a little fun in the midst of all that work that they have to do. So, we incorporate, throughout the six-weeks, fun activities that the youth have at the end of each day. They do activities like swimming, or game night, or movies. Every Friday night we take them off-campus and they go to the movies or they go bowling, eating, those kinds of things. On Saturdays they're off-campus too, and we take them to water parks around the State and shopping. We take them shopping because they receive a stipend as part of this program. Each week they receive a stipend for their work at agencies, but also the work in the classroom.

*What do you feel is the most successful component of your program?*

I really think that all of the four curriculum areas are successful. But if I had some additional resources I think I would continue to develop the relationships skill component. I think as I read the literature, the importance of youth developing social capital is so key to their successful transition from foster care. So, I think some additional resources to expand that component of the program would be helpful.

*What do you think are some of the challenges your program faces?*

I think our biggest two challenges are having to decide which youth are the 25-35%, depending on the funding, that actually have an opportunity to participate in the program. Because there are so many youths who would benefit, it's always a challenge trying to narrow it down. So, that's definitely a challenge for me and for us because we want to serve more youth if possible.

The other challenge would be, although our program is a six-week program and most programs who serve this population are only 3-5 days, we still find that there's so much information we want to cover. There's so much we want to share with the youth. So, we try to really narrow down and make decisions about the curriculum; what we cover, or don't cover, while we have this captive audience.

*What would you like to see your program achieve in the future?*

I would love to see some additional funding to expand to other states. We've run the program in Alabama for a number of years, I'd love to see some funding to try it out in other states. I mean, I think we have a solid model that could be replicated in other states.

*Is there any specific legislation within your state or nationally that you'd like readers to look out for or support?*

I think all of the policy options that were shared in the last NRC-FAHE Newsletter were great policies for us to follow. I think the one that stands out to me is the Higher Education Act of 2017. It's especially important because the focus is to provide grants to states for homeless and foster youth, but a specific part of that is that the funding could be provided for programs that recruit foster and homeless youth to pursue higher education. NSEP is a program that really does recruit our foster youth and encourage them to pursue higher education. That particular act could provide funding for programs like mine to expand the work that want to do in other states as well.

*Any closing comments?*

I would just say that I absolutely love working with this population. I believe that an education is really a difference-maker, whether that is a four-year degree, or a two-year degree, or technical, or even apprenticeship. I think education is a difference-maker for youth that are transitioning from foster care. I believe that a college education for this population has the power to change outcome for generations. You know, I'm hopeful that folks around the country will continue to do this important work and that we will see this work expand as we continue to get funding, and research is done, and evaluations are done on these programs, that we'll see more of them around the country.

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SHANNON HUBBARD, LMSW



Shannon Hubbard, LMSW is the Program Coordinator of Alabama REACH and an Adjunct Instructor at The University of Alabama School of Social Work. She received a BSW in 2001 and MSW in 2004 from The University of Alabama. She has been active in the field of Child Welfare for 18 years working for the Tuscaloosa County Department of Human Resources for 13 years before joining The University of Alabama REACH program in 2015. Alabama REACH is a comprehensive support program designed to empower current and former foster youth, legal orphans, emancipated minors and wards of the state to pursue higher education and graduate from college. Areas of expertise include: working with current and former foster youth; higher education services for at risk populations, adoption services; training and approval of foster and adoptive homes; and teaching Child Welfare related courses at the MSW level. She can be reached at: [hubbao32@ua.edu](mailto:hubbao32@ua.edu)

*What is your role in the program?*

Shannon Hubbard: I am the only full-time employee for the program. I have an assistant that provides tutoring services. He works 20-hours a week and is shared with two other programs on campus. I have a student worker who works an additional 20-hours a week as well. But essentially, the entire scope of the program is my responsibility I am responsible for student recruitment, referral to services located both on and off campus, program coordination, the day to day needs of the students, and I'm the voice for the REACH program when it comes to donors.

My official title is Program Coordinator, I coordinate all services for the program. I work with the Office of Advancement, which is a department on campus that works with donors. From time to time they reach out and ask if I can meet with a particular donor and give them a tour of the REACH office and space, including the computer lab and free printing services that are provided, and as well as share a general overview of the

program. I like to think my time with the donors helps to close the deal!

I also partner with the Counseling Center for students who need referral services for mental health. I've discharged students from mental health facilities, picked them up and made sure they were able to purchase their medication and get home safely. I also work with students at the beginning of each semester to create a plan of what they need to be successful and we incorporate tutoring opportunities or whatever is needed. I check student grades at midterm and then we revisit if there are some areas of difficulty that we need to look at. I assist with employment options for students, helping them find jobs, both on and off campus. I do a lot of one-on-one counseling with students. They stop in and freely chit-chat. I hear about stress from class, stress from birth families, or foster families, stress from significant others, stress from, "I'm about to get my power cut off and I'm looking for resources to help with that." The REACH program is really is tailored to the unique needs of each individual student.

*How did the Alabama REACH program get started?*

Our program started, unofficially, in about 2011. We were first started as a foster care initiative when a foster youth who showed up on the steps of the Rose Administration Building with his acceptance letter to the University of Alabama and no clue what else he needed to do. No schedule, no housing, none of that. At that point, Dr. Judy Bonner was the provost, and she created the foster care initiative. That worked for a brief period of time, but she quickly saw that we would have, and had, more than one student on campus who needed this type of support. From that, in 2012, she formed what we now know as the Alabama REACH program. We serve not only foster youth, current and former, but legal orphan students, students raised in kinship guardianship situations, and homeless students. We have broadened the foster care aspect

to include other students of a similar background.

*Can you talk a little bit about funding the REACH program?*

Funding comes strictly from the University of Alabama and donors. UA funds my position. For programmatic expenses, the things that we do for our students, all that funding comes from donations. We have donations that fund the pantry services that we have for our students and the gift fund account that we use for emergency situations. For instance, if a student owes \$200 on their student bill, or they have no insurance, they can't go to the doctor, or they need glasses, any type of emergency... Anything that most students would go to their parents for, we use our emergency funds to assist them. The tuition assistance REACH provides comes from our Endowed Scholarships set up by 3 different donors. The amount of the scholarship varies based on the financial needs of the student and the amount of scholarship money available. REACH's donations come from partners across the country.

*We've heard a bit about components of your program already, but can you highlight what component(s) you feel are most successful?*

I think the most successful component of the program that we offer is a sense of community to these students. They often feel like they are the only ones on campus who are struggling, or who are going through stressful situations, but when they become part of the REACH program it's like gaining a family. They get a sense of support, and I think that comes from an understanding, they're welcome with open arms and there's no questions asked about what their past may or may not have been. A sense of community is one of the most valuable aspects of the program.

I also think that our group meetings, held twice a month are a successful component of the REACH program. It's basically a family style sit-down dinner, we have good food and I make sure that everyone eats well. For part of the

group meetings, we bring people in from across the University to speak on different topics. We have someone coming to talk about financial literacy the end of March. We've had someone talk about financial aid, understanding scholarship assistance, how to beef up your statement of purpose, and resume building; basically, anything they request assistance with. The students recently asked for an Adulting 101 class to talk about topics such as cooking, taxes, finances, etc. Last week, my student worker presented on basic tax terminology, making sure they know about educational tax credits, what they are eligible, and how easy it is to file taxes online by themselves. No actual tax advice was given, just basic information. Our group meetings not only foster a sense of community for the students but it makes them aware of campus and community resources. I would say, on average, about 75% of students in our program attend these meetings, which is fairly high participation rate for a college program.

The REACH Champion mentoring program is another successful component of the program. Many mentors are UA faculty and staff, others come from local churches and community organizations. We allow the students and mentors to decide for themselves the frequency and type of contact they are going to have each semester. In addition, we offer REACH events throughout the year to bring them together. This gives the student yet another connection and source of support.

*What do you think are the major challenges your program is facing?*

I would say one of our biggest challenges is finances. Because, again, I am one person doing everything. We could use additional support personnel, but the program needs to increase in number of participants in order to show the true need for additional personnel. We also don't have a lot of programmatic money, so I rely on donations from community partners to pay for the programming that we're doing with our students. That's an area of concern that we're trying to address.

Developing a standard operational budget will be essential to the growth of the REACH program.

Another challenge is recruitment of students. You can't go to a 'Get on Board' day event where all other campus programs are present. Students do not want to come up during those events and raise their hand and say, "yes, I was in foster care and I want to be a part of your program!" So, it's really hard to identify these students. To combat that, we are working with our Admissions office to change the language in one of the questions on the admissions application. In the future, it will include every qualifier for the REACH program as an option. Then, I will begin receiving a monthly report with the potential student's contact information if it's indicated they qualify for the REACH program. The report will be used to send correspondence letting the potential student know The University of Alabama has a specific program designed to help them be successful while enrolled at UA.

Due to a lack of programmatic funding, REACH has started utilizing student resources on campus. We worked with the Capstone Agency, which is the largest student run PR firm in the country. We were a part of their Create-A-thon, where they take nonprofit organizations, both on-and-off campus, and revamp or redo whatever you decide, for their PR project. They updated all of our collateral material to make it more student friendly/more eye catching. They developed a social media calendar for us; we have not used social media until very recently. We are now stepping into the social media realm and utilizing Instagram, Facebook, and hopefully Twitter in the near future. The students at the Capstone Agency provided graphics and statistics about the program that can be plug-in and send out through our social media sites as part of their Create-A-thon project.

We also partnered with Dr. Chapman Greer's GBA 300 Business class and they completed a business case analysis on the program and identified ways to strengthen the program from a business

perspective. This has yielded a grant opportunity and several volunteer internships with students in the class who wanted to become more involved with REACH

*Any closing comments?*

The largest project REACH is involved in is developing a database system with a Senior Management Information Systems build team. The database will provide a way to quantify the amount of work that's being done by REACH, track students grades, retention and graduation rates, what qualifies them for the program, how much funding they receive from REACH, life after graduation. Having this information in one system will help us predict if a student is at risk of dropping out, so we can hopefully put preventative measures in place prior to it happening.

We will also use the system to create monthly and annual reports that will say things like, "I saw X number of students for housing or mental health." We will be able to use this information for program evaluation to see things like, "our homeless students are increasing, and our legal orphan participants are not." From there, we can decide where we may need more financial resources and help us dictate what we offer in the following year. I think that once we get the system rolling it's going to generate a lot of different funding opportunities for our program.

*We want to thank Shannon for her time in speaking with us, we look forward to seeing the progress in the REACH program!*



# Policy Updates

New updates from Congress are forthcoming as many of the bills from last year are waiting to be reintroduced. Here is the list of bills introduced in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress that are waiting to be reintroduced in the 116<sup>th</sup>. Please reach out to the original bill sponsors of these bills and encourage them to re-introduce them!

If you're not sure who your elected officials are, visit <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials/>

## FEDERAL BILL HIGHLIGHTS

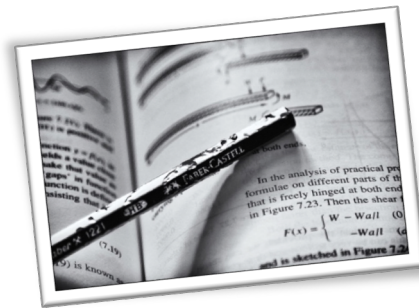
**Unknown 116<sup>th</sup> Bill Number - S. 1795 (Sen. Murray, Patty [D-WA])/H.R. 3740 (Rep. Clark, Katherine M. [D-MA-5]) - Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act**

*This bill has been reintroduced in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress by Sen. Murray but is pending updates on the congress.gov website.*

This bill was originally introduced in the House and Senate on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It currently sits in the House Education and the Workforce Committee for review, and the Senate referred it to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. The bill currently has a combined eleven bi-partisan co-sponsors.

This bill clarifies the eligibility guidelines for determinations of homeless students who qualify for independent status, prioritizes foster and homeless youth for work study awards, forbids the inclusion of education training vouchers and independent living stipends in student cost of attendance formulas, and requires that foster and homeless students not pay more than in-state tuition and fees. It goes further to support homeless and foster youth in higher education institutions by requiring the creation of a staff position that is a "single point of contact" who will be responsible for connecting eligible students with support services, resources, and programs, as well as

ensuring housing priority for these students "during school breaks or year-round" and developing plans to support access to housing "during and between academic years".



Included in this bill are updates to the TRIO and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate programs. Changes to the TRIO program would require revisions and updates to policy and practice in order to remove barriers to homeless and foster youth participation in Talent Search, Upward Bound, Student Support Services and Educational Opportunity Center programs. The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness program requires that individual programs detail how they plan to facilitate participation of homeless and foster youth, remove barriers to participation and collaborate with outside agencies to identify eligible participants.

To learn more and track the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress bill, go to: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3740?q=%7B%22search%3A%5B%22HR3740%5D%7D&r=1>

**Unknown 116<sup>th</sup> Bill Number - S. 1792 (Sen. Franken, Al [D-MN])/H.R. 3742 (Rep. Davis, Danny [D-IL-7]) - Fostering Success in Higher Education Act of 2017**

This bill was introduced in the House and Senate on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It currently sits in the House Education and the Workforce Committee for review, and the Senate referred it to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. The bill currently has 26 bi-partisan co-sponsors in the House.

This bill will amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to provide grants to states to improve higher education opportunities to homeless and foster youth. Under

the measure, funding can be provided for programs that seem to recruit foster and homeless youth to pursue higher education and provide supportive services for student who are enrolled.

To learn more and track the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress bill, go to: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3742?q=%7B%22search%3A%5B%22HR3742%5D%7D&r=1>

**Unknown 116<sup>th</sup> Bill Number - H.R. 2236 (Rep. Davis, Danny K. [D-IL-7]) - Foster and Homeless Youth Food Security Act of 2017**

This bill was introduced in the House on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It was referred to the House Committee on Agriculture, then to the Subcommittee on Nutrition in May 2017, where it remains. The bill currently has five Democratic co-sponsors.

This short but important bill amends the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 by adding a new definition of "foster care individual" to the Act, and a redefinition of "food" to include meals prepared and served by higher education institutions. It also allows a foster care or homeless youth SNAP benefits if they are enrolled at least half-time by granting a household and work requirement exception.

To learn more and track the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress bill, go to: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2236?q=%7B%22search%3A%5B%22HR2236%5D%7D&r=1>

**Unknown 116<sup>th</sup> Bill Number - H.R. 6157 (Passed) (Rep. Granger, Kay [R-TX-12]) - Department of Defense and Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Act, 2019 and Continuing Appropriations Act, 2019**

This bill was introduced in the House on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This bill passed the House on June, 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and the Senate on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018. It was presented to the President for signature on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018

This bill provides an 11.6% increase in funds committed to TRIO programs,

from FY2017. There are increases in funding to support career and technical education programs (13%), as well as Pell Grants (5.7%).

This information was provided by School House Connection. For further details on the educational aspects of the bill, please go to:

<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/fy2019-funding-bill-passes-expected-to-be-signed-into-law/>

To learn more and track the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress bill, go to:

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/6157?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22H.R.+6157%22%5D%7D&r=1>

### STATE EFFORT HIGHLIGHTS

Waiting to be reintroduced - Pennsylvania - HB1745 (Referred to Committee) - Fostering Independence Through Education Act

The proposed bill provides a tuition and fee waiver for undergraduate courses to eligible individuals who reside in the commonwealth. Eligible individuals must be between 14 and 26, have been in substitute care for at least six months, at any time, while 14 years of age or older. An individual who was adopted or placed with a permanent guardian at or after the age of 14 is also considered eligible. The individual must have completed high school (or its equivalent), have been accepted to or currently attending a State postsecondary educational institution, and have applied for all available Federal and State grants. The waiver can last up to five-years, consecutive or not, or until the individual reaches 26 years of age.

To learn more about this bill, go to:

<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/billinfo/billinfo.cfm?sYear=2017&sInd=0&body=H&type=B&bn=1745>

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We recognize that this list is, by no means, all inclusive. 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](mailto:dayangel@uw.edu)

# Article Highlights

We are always excited to share the work of our collaborative members. In this issue we highlight a recent article by one of our members. 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 and we will work on including it in the future.

**NATHANAEL J. OKPYCH, Ph.D.**



Nathanael Okpych is an Assistant Professor at the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work. He is also the Project Director for the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study. He is interested in understanding factors that influence college success for young people with foster care histories, and using this knowledge to inform intervention approaches to increase college entry, persistence, and completion rates. He can be reached at: [nathanael.okpych@uconn.edu](mailto:nathanael.okpych@uconn.edu)

Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2018). The role of avoidant attachment on college persistence and completion among youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 90, 106-117.

## Study Summary

Research college outcomes for students with foster care histories has shifted from documenting disparities to identifying actionable risk and protective factors. One understudied

contributor is long-lasting effects of trauma from past maltreatment and repeated changes in caregivers and schools that many youth experience while in foster care. One concrete way that past trauma can affect foster youths' college outcomes is through their attachment style. Several qualitative studies have documented that, in response to repeated loss and maltreatment, some foster youth adopt a highly guarded and self-protective stance to relationships (e.g., Kools, 1999; Morton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008) known as "avoidant attachment" in developmental psychology. While an avoidant style protects youth from future distress, it may also wall them off from beneficial relationships that can undermine their best efforts to persist in college. This study investigated whether avoidant attachment negatively affected youths' later college outcomes (persistence and degree completion). The study analyzed secondary data from the Midwest Study, and included 329 study participants who had enrolled in college. Information on persistence and degree completion were obtained from National Student Clearinghouse Records.

## Key Findings

There were three important findings. First, as expected, participants who had experienced more maltreatment, placement changes, and school changes in the past displayed higher levels of avoidant attachment in late adolescence (around age 17). This corroborates the link between past trauma and attachment avoidance. Second, after controlling for a range of possible confounders, both the odds of persistence and degree completion decreased by about 30 percent for every standard deviation higher youth were in their level of avoidant attachment. Third, the relationship between avoidant attachment and the college outcomes were partially explained by the amount of social support that youth had around the time they were in college. That is, youth high in avoidant attachment perceived having less social support, and

this hurt their chances of persisting and completing a degree.

## Implications

This finding points to avoidant attachment as being a driving force that decreases the chances of college success. Although social support was not able to be investigated in great detail, the findings suggest that the high emotional guardedness and self-reliance that is characteristic of avoidant attachment may diminish the social support youth have in college, and this decreases their chances of succeeding. If it is the case that avoidant attachment is durable over time and deleteriously impacts college outcomes, a critical question is whether it is responsive to intervention. Can youth high in avoidant attachment become less emotionally guarded and self-reliant, and what interventions may facilitate this? These are complex questions that elude simple answers. There are likely many factors at play, and youth will differ in the extent to which they are ready for and receptive to changing their customary approach to relationships that has provided them with a sense of safety and protection. Psychotherapy for trauma and loss is one type of intervention that may be helpful, since it addresses trauma that underlies avoidant attachment. Normalizing obstacles and help-seeking in college may also be helpful. Finally, campus-based support programs, which gives students the opportunity to develop close relationships with staff and peers, may also help to reclaim trust.

# Highlighted Opportunities

Keep an eye out here for upcoming webinars, training sessions, or conferences that our collaborative members are hosting or attending. We will share any potential funding or employment opportunities that we think may be of interest. Please let us know if you would like a specific opportunity to be promoted in our next newsletter!

## CONFERENCES

April 24<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> Washington, DC

### The 21<sup>st</sup> National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN)

The 21<sup>st</sup> NCCAN offers a unique opportunity to come together for leadership and action-oriented dialogue around creating a continuum of supports to ensure that we are a nation of **Strong and Thriving Families** – the theme of this year’s conference. The Children’s Bureau is committed to advancing national efforts that strengthen the capacity of families to nurture and provide for the well-being of their children. At the 21<sup>st</sup> NCCAN, child welfare staff, child maltreatment prevention partners, the legal and judicial community, parents, foster care

alumni, child and family serving professionals, and community members will explore strategies for making this vision of strong and thriving families a reality.

The Learning Tracks for this year’s conference are:

1. Prioritize Prevention
2. Focus on Well-Being
3. Reshape Foster Care as a Support for Families
4. Build Community Capacity
5. Support the Workforce

For more information please go to <https://nccan.acf.hhs.gov/index.html#&panel1-1>



## FUNDING

No current opportunities highlighted as of this publishing.

## EMPLOYMENT

No current opportunities highlighted as of this publishing.

## WEBINARS

Check out the NRC-FAHE Webinar Archive to see the past Webinar presentations (<https://www.nrc-fahe.org/archive-webinars>).