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How to Support Educational Attainment for Young People in Foster Care

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Young adults who have been raised in foster care are more likely to experience negative social outcomes than their non-fostered peers. These young people face higher risks for homelessness, unemployment, curtailed education, mental illness, teen pregnancy, and suicide. When they emerge from the foster care system as adults, these young men and women have difficulty assuming the increased responsibility of caring for themselves with little to no family support. All too often, they end up back in the social welfare systems from which they departed at the end of foster care.

The cost of poor outcomes for those exiting foster care has been estimated at almost eight billion dollars. By age 26, only three to four percent of youth who aged out of foster care earn a college degree. One in five of these youth will become homeless after turning age 18. Only half will obtain employment by age 24. More than seven in ten females will become pregnant by age 21. And one in four former foster youth will experience post-traumatic stress syndrome.

College Experiences

Recent policy changes in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act encourage states to continue supporting young adults to age 26 with post-foster-care transitional programs. However, a 2016 multi-state report showed that, despite these changes, the most intensive programs to support former foster youth attained only a six-point improvement in education outcomes. These numbers suggest that students with a childhood history of foster care have complex needs that are not being met in colleges and universities. Current policy initiatives are not enough. More work needs to be done to ensure these young adults can make it to a bachelor's degree.

Developmental Difficulties

Early trauma and stress can have a lasting effect on development. Complex developmental trauma is defined as "the experience of multiple, chronic, and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most often of an interpersonal nature." Many adopted and foster children are emotionally unstable and find it hard to form healthy relationships or achieve at school and college. Developmental research suggests that foster youth are consumed with the recovery from early traumas and less focused on making important decisions about college. Consequently, only 9% of maturing foster youth apply to postsecondary institutions, and less than half of previously fostered students stay in college for two or more semesters.

Twenty Years to Life

In the 2017 Commencement Ceremony at the University of Maine, I was 37 years old and receiving my bachelor's degree along with several hundred other graduates, most of whom were younger, completing college at the traditional age. At my alma mater, I was the only one that I knew of that had experienced foster care. Despite my atypical educational journey, I had not been able to take advantage of any state or federally-sponsored funding or programs designed for aged-out foster youth. I learned that in many cases, I was too old to take advantage of these programs, or that the definition of the "foster child" in many programs excludes my nine years of foster care experience because those years occurred before age 14.

Despite my initial desire for education, I also learned that my childhood traumas diminished my skills and ability to navigate through college pathways. Like other foster youth, I was prone to make repeated mistakes, had to repeat classes, and was unable to make critical decisions regarding coursework, friends, work–life balance, or unexpected crises without expert guidance. Not until two decades after high school did I graduate — earning a double degree in social work and sociology, earning a 3.3 GPA and a place in the graduate school to study higher education and student development. I often wonder what I might have already accomplished if I had earned my degree in 2002 and was able much earlier to make meaningful contributions to my community, support my future family, and work through my complex identity and developmental issues. Over the years, I have received over $354,000 in federal and state benefits for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, childcare, transportation, housing, food, and emergency benefits. Overall, my college education costs totaled $74,000, with a lot of this paid by accumulating student loan debt. My salary today places me on the so-called 'welfare-cliff' without a safety net, and I still struggle to pay my bills. Waiting so long to start a good-paying job means I may never be self-sufficient.

Policy Recommendations

Research consistently shows that educational outcomes for foster youth have been not significantly affected by recent policy changes, suggesting that improved attempts to equalize opportunities for foster youth should involve policies more fully grounded in developmental science. It is important to understand that, because of complex childhood traumas, some students may not be able or willing to take advantage of these programs without considerable, meaningful assistance.

States can make progress by:

- Eliminating the age cap for foster youth to access transitional services through state agencies.
- Proving more resources to fostered youth to encourage them to pursue higher education.
- Encouraging public institutions to design campus programs that support foster youth.

If young people leaving foster care completed high school and attended postsecondary education at the same rate as their peers, nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education. Expanding access to assistance and college counseling will lower the societal costs of abandoning these young people too soon. Unless the United States eases transitions for foster care graduates, they are likely to remain in the social-welfare system for their entire adult lives, at great cost to themselves and society as a whole.

Read more in Robyn Young "Supporting Foster Care Youth," (working paper, 2019).