



Helping Young Adults from Foster Care Succeed in College

Research and Training Center
for Pathways to Positive Futures



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The vast majority of young adults from foster care want to succeed academically. However, there are several important reasons why many foster youth do not end up going to college or succeed at college. Understanding these issues, as well as some basic strategies for supporting students from foster care, can make all the difference in their success.



Life Instability

A major barrier experienced by many youth and young adults from foster care is life instability associated with living in multiple foster homes and changing schools, all of which requires repeatedly adjusting to new environments and expectations. This instability can hinder development, learning in high school, and higher education engagement and academic success. Additionally, many young adults from foster care do not have consistent adult support in their lives, which can make succeeding at college even more difficult.

How can a history of life instability look in college?

Sense of Belonging

Students may have difficulty relating to peers, staff and professors about relatively normal things others may take for granted. For example, embarrassment around not knowing how to interpret a syllabus or knowing what to discuss with an adviser may lead to assignments not being completed, course failure and withdrawal from college without guidance. Lack of experience in understanding higher education culture can lead to isolation, feelings of alienation and not belonging, and ultimately academic problems. Students also may be hesitant to reach out for information, advice or support because trust may not come easily for students from foster care. The trauma of being placed in foster care away from family of origin, coupled with having many short-term relationships with professionals who come and go in the system, often lead young people in care to adopt a more cautious approach in reaching out and trusting others.



TIP

Be mindful of the fact that not every student is well versed in university lingo. Students should not be shamed for their lack of understanding or reluctance to reach out, implicitly or explicitly. Students coming from foster care may be intimidated by the level of academic privilege they are surrounded by. Remember that patience and empathy go a long way to building rapport and trust with students from foster care.

Holidays Are More Stressful

Holidays can be very stressful because students may not know where they will be living or whether where they stay will be welcoming. Often students from foster care spend the holidays alone without any connections to family. It is not the student's fault; dealing with difficult family experiences and establishing relationships with trusted others can be so much more complicated for students from foster care than for young people from traditional family structures. It may not be easy to find people that these students are comfortable with or who will invite them to spend time together during holidays. A student from foster care who lives in the residence hall may be one of the few who stays on campus during holiday breaks, and this experience can be isolating and emotionally difficult. Students share that these experiences are common among those who grew up in care and do not have stable, reliable supports.

TIP

Do not assume holidays are always a happy time for everyone. Students might be on their own without food or activities to take part in. Residence hall meal plans may not work well over the break and students may be short on money to take care of themselves or to do activities. They may be afraid to reach out, not wanting to be a burden. Perhaps you are attending an activity over the break that the student could attend with you. Maybe you would like to ask the student to join your family for a holiday meal or activity. Even giving a holiday card can mean a great deal to some students.

Mental Health and Trauma

Most students coming from foster care have experienced mental health distress related to trauma, life instability, separation from loved ones, poverty, loneliness, or other factors. Dealing with anxiety, depression or other mental health stressors, along with typical stressors of college, can make it more difficult to keep up with coursework and to reach out for course extensions or advice.

TIP

If students seem distracted in class, this might be why. Being distracted in class or missing a class does not necessarily mean that students are not invested. Self-care is an important part of managing stress. If you see a student struggling, reach out and ask if they are accessing resources that you know might help.



Homelessness and Other Barriers

Coming from a place of instability, students with lived experience with foster care and mental health stressors are at very high risk of homelessness, unemployment, food insecurity or other barriers. These barriers affect all aspects of life; if one's basic needs aren't being met, college will be a struggle.



Be mindful that students may be experiencing these or other barriers. Students from foster care are often smart and capable, but sometimes the weight of the world without adequate support from family or family-like systems is too much to bear on their own.

Coursework

Imagine how instability, homelessness, or lack of food or money may impact one's ability to concentrate in class and complete readings and assignments on time. Sometimes students don't have time to go to the library to study because they have to work anytime they can in order to afford food or save money to find a place to live. Unfortunately, financial aid seldom covers everything. After work, when students get home (or if students are homeless, back to a shelter, someone's couch or the street), they may be too exhausted to retain information from readings or the environment may be too distracting. Sometimes these students also are responsible for the care of their siblings and this too adds a tremendous amount of pressure and stress to their lives.



Consider offering some flexibility on course due dates or work with a student in identifying other options for accommodating his or her situation, given course requirements. Please remember that a note from a doctor or therapist is not always possible for students to get, but that doesn't mean students aren't being honest about their circumstances.

Engagement and Belonging

Many students also hope that college will provide stability often not found in foster care. However, once students from foster care enter college, they often experience feelings of confusion around not knowing how to find information and services, or how to build social connections. As a result, many students experience isolation without supports in place to promote their knowledge, confidence or sense of belonging.



The simple act of acknowledging and supporting students from foster care can create a safe space for them to be heard and understood. Faculty and staff that reach out to help students provide them with a platform to learn about and experience more fully what it means to be a welcomed, engaged, and a successful college student. Building connections to faculty, other students and campus opportunities and resources can help these students truly feel that they belong in college. Further, a student from foster care who has learned how to connect with faculty, to access services such as tutoring, and to become involved in student groups, athletics, or other extracurricular activities is more likely to successfully graduate.

Labels/Services

As they interface with child welfare and other systems, many foster youth are labeled with disabilities and mental health challenges and/or they have IEPs during K-12 education. They are disproportionately diagnosed with learning disabilities and/or mental health stressors compared to the rest of the population, often related to their exposure to very difficult life experiences. In association with having these labels, many youth from foster care feel stigmatized by repeated messages that they are “troubled” or won’t be successful adults. These labels often feel like a false representation of what foster youth believe they are capable of and how much they have already achieved or persevered throughout their lives.

How does this look in college?

Disability Services

Many students are reluctant to disclose learning, emotional or other issues, and may not be registered for disability services. However, accessing this resource could help students to obtain supports and accommodations that give them a fair chance at academic success, as well as to advocate for other needed services.



If you see that a student from foster care is struggling, offer your encouragement and support, highlighting that the student is not alone and that there are services available on campus worth checking out. Whether or not students are registered for disability services, try to be mindful of how trauma has played into their lives and their capability to handle stress and other things. Students are more than their labels. Appreciate how far these students' stressors have come to get to college!



Mental Health Support

Students may or may not have the time, or resources to access mental health support, or they may feel it would not help. Student health and counseling services typically have limits for use, and it may be even harder to secure those supports when students are covered by certain insurance plans.



Though good mental health care can be important, it is hard to access sometimes. That does not mean students do not need it or that what they are going through is not valid. And perhaps a student needs help finding ongoing support. Conversely, many youth feel “forced” into treatment while in foster care and they may need space and time to feel empowered about their decision to engage in formal mental health services after they have exited foster care. Please be patient and offer resources, while accepting that a student may not be ready to engage in the resources you have offered.

Transition

Transition into adulthood for foster youth can be sudden and abrupt. It is often much harder than for the general population. Supports that most young adults would typically have are sometimes just not there for those exiting foster care.

How does this look in college?

Transitioning to adulthood is challenging for all young adults, let alone for young people in foster care. For example, many young adults do not know how to apply for a credit card. Additionally, youth exiting foster care, even those 18 or older, may also have trouble accessing legal documents, like an ID, birth certificate or social security card. Likewise, many youth in care do not have opportunities when they are younger to see a doctor or learn to take medication independently, to cook or shop for food, to drive a car, or to manage money. Thus, they lack experience and knowledge that's essential for establishing successful, independent adult lives. And catching up on missed experiences can be even harder because adult support often abruptly disappears when a young adult exits foster care. Most typical young people have parents or other family members that don't go away when their children turn eighteen or go to college, whereas adult support for young adults in care tends to drop away.



If you can spare some of your time to make things a bit less difficult for students from foster care, reach out to offer your knowledge and/or support or recommend other potential resources. Please do so, as reaching out to a student can make a great difference.



Finally, Always Remember...

Students from foster care have the capacity to thrive beyond any barriers to achieve their academic, professional, and personal goals. Most already have the self-determination and resilience it takes to be a successful student and often just need more opportunities to experience success and gain support from those who may have knowledge, connections and other resources that could be of help. Students from foster care who successfully graduated from college have shared that their education created a path towards achieving dreams that at one time seemed impossible. They have emphasized that their education was more than academics and that the connections and bonds they established made important, positive differences in their experiences on campus.



Know that YOU can make a difference in not only promoting the success of those students from foster care already in college, but also in creating a campus environment that encourages more young adults in foster care to attend college, knowing they will be welcomed and receive the support needed to graduate.



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a difference
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