



Readiness for college engagement among students who have aged out of foster care

Yvonne A. Unrau ^{a,*}, Sarah A. Font ^b, Glinda Rawls ^c

^a School of Social Work, Western Michigan University, 1903 W. Michigan Avenue, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5354, United States

^b School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States

^c University Counseling and Testing Center, Western Michigan University, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study compares self-reported readiness to engage in college between a sample of 81 college freshmen who aged out of foster care prior to or while attending a large four-year public university and the national freshman population. Results indicate that students from foster care are significantly different from their non-foster-care peers in their readiness to engage in college. The results also show that foster youth are less well prepared academically upon entering college and this performance gap persists through the first semester of college. These findings are examined in the context of the current literature on foster youth. Limitations of the study and implications for future research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There were over 423,000 children living in foster-care placements on any given day in the United States in 2009. Of these, over 32,000 exited the foster care system by “aging out” to independence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Aging out is a legal event that occurs when the court formally discharges a young person from the state’s custody based on the youth’s chronological age. In most states, foster youth are discharged at 18 years of age; however, an increasing number of states are extending care to 21 years old as a result of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

Previous research studies have indicated that most aged-out youth leaving foster care do so in unprepared and unplanned ways, and many either return to their families who were judged unfit by the court or begin living on their own (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Upon aging-out of the system, these youth are abruptly initiated into adulthood and must rely heavily on their limited personal resources and income for their very survival (Iglehart, 1995).

Young people who have lived in foster care are less able to depend on family members for shelter, adult guidance, and financial support after high school than non-foster youth (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Iglehart, 1995). Educational attainment for foster youth lags far behind their non-foster-care peers, with just over half of foster youth completing high school (Sheehy et al., 2001; Wolanin, 2005).

Though estimates of high-school completion for foster youth vary across studies, the average of estimates suggests that approximately half of the youth between the ages of 18 and 24 who have aged out of foster care have high-school diplomas or general educational development (GED) diplomas in comparison to over 70% of non-foster youth (Wolanin, 2005). Other studies have found higher estimates of high-school achievement for foster youth, particularly when students attaining their GEDs are counted (Pecora et al., 2005). This disparity has obvious implications for college entrance. Only 15% of foster youth are likely to enroll in college-preparatory classes during high school, whereas 32% of non-foster youth enroll in a high-school curriculum that helps to prepare them for college (Sheehy et al., 2001). Additionally, while college is a possible next step after high school, students growing up in foster care receive few encouraging messages from educators, social workers, and other adults regarding the pursuit of a college education (Davis, 2006). Only 20% of college-qualified foster youth attend college compared to 60% of their non-foster-care peers (Wolanin, 2005). Similarly, degree completion for foster youth, with estimates ranging from a low of 1% to a high of 10.8%, is substantially lower than the 24% degree-completion rate of non-foster youth (Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005).

Research has generally suggested more negative outcomes for former foster youth compared to the general population, including disproportionate representation in the adult homeless population (Park, Metraux, & Culhane, 2005) as well as increased rates of unemployment and lack of health insurance (Reilly, 2003), mental illness (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006), and involvement in the criminal justice system (McMillen, Vaughn, & Shook, 2008).

In response to these dismal trajectories, federal legislation has provided monies to states to pay for services to help with the transition

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 269 387 3185(Office).
E-mail address: yvonne.unrau@wmich.edu (Y.A. Unrau).

out of foster care into some form of independent living. For example, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provides funding (\$140 million) to state governments to improve and expand their current independent-living programs for foster youth who age out of the system.

The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendment of 2001 enhances the Foster Care Independence Act by providing additional funding (\$60 million) for payments to state governments for post-secondary education and training. This funding pays for the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) program, which provides up to \$5000 per year up to age 23 for foster youth enrolled in post-secondary education as long as they enroll in the ETV program prior to 21 years of age. The Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 permits states to claim federal reimbursement for foster-care maintenance payments made on behalf of foster youth to age 21. Foster youth living in states that take advantage of this policy and extend care can benefit by voluntarily remaining in the state's custody.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Foster youths' barriers to higher education

One barrier to entering higher education for foster youth is their difficulty in completing primary and secondary education. Teenagers in foster care are involved in special-education classes at comparatively higher rates during their secondary educational experiences than non-foster care-teens (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Pecora et al., 2006). Furthermore, they are more likely than their non-foster-care counterparts to drop out of high school, repeat a grade, or be suspended or expelled (Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2004). When compared to non-foster youth, foster youth also have higher rates of changing schools which is related to their lower academic achievement and attainment (Blome, 1997; Pecora et al., 2006).

Foster youth also encounter general obstacles during their emerging years of young adulthood (i.e., 18–25 years of age). Youth aging out of foster care struggle more than other young adults across a number of important lifespan-developmental domains including: academics and education; finances and employment; housing; physical and mental health; social relationships and community connections; personal and cultural identity development; and life skills (Casey Family Programs, 2006). Many foster youth enter young adulthood with significant educational deficits, and the lasting effects of these deficits are evident in their dismal educational attainment (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). The problems encountered by foster youth in each of the domains can be barriers to education.

The struggle that foster youth have with practical or systemic barriers in other life domains makes it difficult to access or stay in school after aging out of foster care. For example, it is estimated that only about one-third of youth aging out of foster care left the system with basic resources such as a driver's license, cash, or basic necessities such as dishes (Pecora et al., 2006). Most do not have anyone to co-sign a loan or lease, which makes it difficult to secure safe housing. Medicaid and funds for start-up goods are available in some states until age 21, but foster youth must be able to navigate the large and complicated state bureaucratic programs to receive these benefits. Courtney et al. (2010) found that the main barriers for higher-education access among foster youth were a lack of financial resources, the need to be in full-time employment, parenting responsibilities, and a lack of transportation. These practical and systemic obstacles provide some understanding as to why foster youth are less likely to access and succeed in college.

Nonetheless, several studies have reported that a significant number of foster youth want to pursue a college degree. Courtney et al. (2010), for example, reported that 79% of the foster youth in their study wanted to go to college. McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson (2003) reported similar findings whereby 70% of the foster youth they surveyed planned to attend college.

1.1.2. Foster youth attending college

A recent study that controlled for race and gender found that foster youth attending a four-year university were more likely to drop out of college compared to low-income first-generation student who had not lived in foster care (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). However, there is a paucity of research exploring the reasons foster youth are less likely to succeed in college. We found three studies that investigate how foster youth fare in college settings. Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt (2005) surveyed an ethnically diverse sample of 216 college students who spent an average of 7 to 8 years, and three placements, in foster care. They found that only about one quarter of these students felt prepared to live independently upon exiting the foster-care system, and about the same percentage believed that the foster-care system had sufficiently prepared them for college. The majority of the sample was succeeding academically, but reported challenges with finances, psychological distress and access to health care. Social support from friends and family was identified as a factor that possibly contributed to the educational success of the sample.

Davis (2006) reviewed the many factors that inhibit the ability of foster youth to develop the strong academic foundation necessary to be successful in higher education. These factors included challenges encountered during primary and secondary education, multiple school changes, incidence of disruptive behaviors in the classroom, and higher incidence of learning delays. Foster youth also had far less personal income than their peers but were awarded a sufficient level of financial aid so that it did not impact their choice of institution. Davis noted that although state and federal programs aim to provide financial support to former foster youth enrolled in postsecondary education, such support is inadequate when not accompanied by structured social and academic support efforts.

Dworsky and Perez (2010) collected information from a nonrandom sample of 98 college students who participated in a campus support program for former foster youth in Washington or California. The sample was racially diverse, primarily female, and had an average age of 20 years old. Nearly all participants placed value on academic guidance such as advice on choosing courses or declaring a major, and many also asserted the importance of mentoring and leadership opportunities. Students overall reported that their campus support-program participation provided them with a sense of belonging in a way similar to that which one might feel in a family setting. Though students also found financial aid and housing assistance to be of great importance, Dworsky and Perez (2010) noted that students were more likely to report gaining a sense of family through the program than they were to report receiving material assistance.

With the assistance of federal and state funding, foster youth are finding their way to higher-education institutions in increasing numbers (Fried, 2008). Colleges are starting to take notice of these young adults as evidenced by the growing number of campus programs designed to provide financial, academic, and other supports to students who have aged out of the foster care system (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; Dworsky & Perez, 2010), yet little is known about foster youths' level of readiness to engage in college. Even less is known about foster youths' personal, social, interpersonal, academic, and career-development needs during their transition into college and ways that child welfare and higher education professionals can offer assistance.

1.2. Purpose

It is important to understand how foster youth entering college compare to the general freshman-student population when it comes to their readiness for college engagement so that professionals supporting them can be better prepared to understand and respond to their needs. The purpose of this study, therefore, is twofold: (1) to identify and measure foster youths' readiness for college engagement, (i.e., academic motivation, social motivation, receptivity to student services, general coping); and (2) to compare the readiness for college engagement

among freshmen foster youth prior to the start of college to the readiness for college engagement among freshmen in general. In addition, this article describes the first-semester performance of freshmen foster youth to other freshmen enrolled in the same university.

This study took place at Western Michigan University, which offers comprehensive campus-based support to foster youth and former foster youth through the Seita Scholars Program. This program is designed to facilitate the transition from foster care to college and to provide support to foster and former foster youth through to their graduations and career transitions. The Program began in 2008 with the specific goal of increasing the number of young people from foster care earning baccalaureate degrees. It also aims to create a community of scholars among foster youth in college. The Program includes a tuition scholarship and offers 24-hour staff support in the multiple life domains mentioned earlier (i.e., academics and education; finances and employment; housing; physical and mental health; social relationships and community connections; personal and cultural identity development; life skills). To be eligible for the Program, students must have met the admissions standards for the university and qualified for the ETV, which means they entered foster care through child protective services, were in foster care on or after their 14th birthday and, if adopted, the adoption occurred after their 16th birthday.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The convenience sample for this exploratory cross-sectional survey was 81 former foster youth who graduated from high school and were admitted as freshmen in the 2009 ($n = 35$) and 2010 ($n = 46$) fall semesters. Participants were identified by their enrollment in the Seita Scholars Program. They ranged from 17 to 20 years of age. The sample was 65% female and 55% racial minority, or students who identified as either African American, another minority race, or multiracial. These characteristics of race and gender set the sample apart from the general population of first-time-in-any-college (FTIAC) students at the same university, which was 50% female and 21% minority race. Although students in the sample met the minimum eligibility criteria for admission to the university, their average high school grade point average (GPA) was significantly lower at 3.07 ($sd = .37$) compared to 3.25 ($sd = .45$) for the general FTIAC population admitted to the same university ($t = 4.38$, $df = 78$, $p < .0001$). Similarly, the mean ACT score for foster youth at 18.6 ($sd = 2.7$) was significantly lower than the average ACT score of 22.0 ($sd = 3.7$) for other FTIAC freshmen ($t = 10.53$, $df = 78$, $p < .0001$).

2.2. Procedure and analysis

This study measured readiness for college engagement as well as academic performance outcomes.

2.2.1. Readiness for college engagement

Readiness for college engagement was measured by the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI), Form A (Stratil, 2009). Participants were required by the Program to complete the CSI in the summer prior to their first semester of college. The CSI (Form A) contains 194 items measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale and is a self-report instrument that is comprised of 17 scales organized into four main categories as follows:

- Academic motivation is comprised of five scales: (1) *academic confidence* (e.g., belief in one's ability related to memory, concentration, figuring things out), (2) *attitude toward educators* (e.g., view teachers as caring, interesting, and generally doing a good job), (3) *desire to finish college* (e.g., confidence in the decision to go to

college and expectations that one will graduate from college), (4) *intellectual interests* (e.g., interest and satisfaction with reading books), and (5) *study habits* (e.g., self-discipline to study, study skills);

- Social motivation is made up of three scales: (1) *sociability* (e.g., interest in other people, participating in social gatherings), (2) *self-reliance* (e.g., rely on own ideas to make decisions, faith in one's own reasoning, confidence in own opinions), and (3) *leadership* (e.g., considered a leader by others, have served as a group leader);
- Receptivity to student services is comprised of four scales: (1) *receptivity to academic assistance* (e.g., willingness to accept help to improve basics such as reading, writing, math and study skills), (2) *receptivity to career counseling* (e.g., willingness to accept help to learn about different occupations, job markets, and to prepare for a job after college), (3) *receptivity to social enrichment* (e.g., willingness to meet other students on campus and to participate in student-organized social events and activities); and (4) *receptivity to personal counseling* (e.g., willingness to talk with a counselor about personal topics including emotional stress, family problems, personal relationships and attitude toward school); and,
- General coping includes five scales: (1) *sense of financial security* (e.g., concern or worry about personal finances), (2) *family support* (e.g., feelings of being firmly supported and understood by parents and family members, parents are available to discuss important issues), (3) *openness* (e.g., willing to explore different opinions and ways of doing things, open to new ideas), (4) *ease of transition* (e.g., expectations about adapting to college and making new friends), and (5) *career planning* (e.g., thought given to career choices, steps take to explore career options).

Inventories were scored by Noel-Levitz, Inc. Raw data files containing no identifying information were downloaded and stored by the designated staff of the campus-based program providing scholarship and supports to this group of students. The study was approved by a university Human Subject Institutional Review Board.

The national mean on the CIS (Form A) for college freshmen is a score of 50. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the characteristic described by the scale name. The average alpha reliability coefficient for the scales is .83, with coefficients for all scales falling between .72 and .90 (Stratil, 2001).

One-sample two-tailed *t*-tests were used to compare the mean scale scores of our sample to the population mean of freshman college students nationally.

2.2.2. Academic performance

To compare academic performance of freshman foster youth to other freshmen enrolled in the same university, we utilized institutional summary data. For this comparison, our sample was restricted to FTIAC students, and a total of 79 FTIAC foster youth enrolled during fall 2009 and 2010 were compared to a total of 6517 non-foster-youth FTIAC freshmen over the same period. Four measures of academic performance were examined at the end of the first semester of college: (1) withdrawal from one or more courses, (2) average number of credit hours attempted at the start of the semester, (3) average number of credit hours passed at the end of the semester, and (4) GPA.

3. Results

Overall, our sample of students from foster care significantly differed from the national freshman population in their perceived readiness to begin the freshman year of college (see Table 1).

3.1. Foster youths' readiness for college

3.1.1. Academic motivation

As can be seen in Table 1, our sample of students from foster care reported being more academically motivated than their non-foster

Table 1Self-report readiness to engage in college: a foster youth sample compared to the general freshman population^a.

	<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>	Range	<i>t</i>	
<i>Academic motivation</i>					
1. Academic confidence	53.90	29.64	98	1.18	
2. Attitude toward educators	64.51	28.63	97	4.56	**
3. Desire to finish	61.46	26.97	93	3.82	**
4. Intellectual interests	56.81	25.35	92	2.42	*
5. Study habits	57.88	28.06	98	2.53	*
<i>Social motivation</i>					
6. Sociability	52.28	30.12	97	0.68	
7. Self reliance	57.05	26.95	98	2.35	*
8. Leadership	57.81	28.88	97	2.44	*
<i>Receptivity to student services</i>					
9. Academic assistance	64.74	25.99	96	5.10	**
10. Career counseling	29.25	7.49	33	−24.92	**
11. Social enrichment	71.41	23.71	98	8.13	**
12. Personal counseling	65.78	30.86	89	4.60	**
<i>General coping</i>					
13. Sense of financial security	54.26	26.71	98	1.43	
14. Family support	28.75	25.09	87	−7.62	**
15. Openness	51.51	25.06	94	0.54	
16. Ease of transition	48.28	29.93	97	−.52	
17. Career planning	53.49	28.63	98	1.10	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test).^a The national mean for college freshmen is a score of 50.

care counterparts, with their scores exceeding the national average (50) on four of the five academic-motivation scales. Scores from the former foster youth suggest that they have more positive attitudes toward educators and a stronger desire to finish college than the national freshman population. Our sample reported having better study skills and higher levels of interest in intellectual activities than their non-foster care peers; however, level of academic confidence was about the same for both groups.

3.1.2. Social motivation

Our sample of students from foster care was somewhat more socially motivated than the national college freshman population in areas of self-reliance and leadership. Table 1 shows that our sample perceived themselves as possessing more leadership qualities and being more self-reliant than their non-foster care counterparts; however, scores on sociability were not significantly different between the two groups. In other words, students in the foster-care sample were not any more likely to see themselves engaged in student-organized activities after moving to campus; however, they perceived themselves as having had more leadership experience and as relying more on themselves for personal decision-making, as compared to the general freshman population.

3.1.3. Receptivity to student services

Our sample was significantly different from the national freshman population on all four scales measuring their willingness to utilize resources available on college campuses. In the areas of social enrichment, personal counseling, and academic assistance, our sample indicated they were significantly more likely to utilize such services than their non-foster care counterparts. Conversely, they were significantly less likely than the general freshman population to be open to career counseling (see Table 1).

3.1.4. General coping

As can be seen in Table 1, our sample was significantly different from the national freshman population on one of the five general

coping scales. Our foster care sample indicated having much less family support than their freshman peers who did not experience foster care. Scores on financial security, openness, ease of transition and career planning, however, suggest that students from foster care perceive their readiness for college on these dimensions about the same as the general freshman population.

The study results thus far suggest that foster youth admitted and about to enter a four-year college perceive themselves possessing greater readiness for college than the general freshman population.

3.2. First-semester academic performance

Our next step was to investigate how well the foster youth performed in comparison to other freshmen at the same university. We present summary data prepared by the university's institutional research office, and observe some differences. While students in both groups registered for an average of 14 credit hours at the start of their first semester of college, our sample of students from foster care completed an average of 10 credits by the end of the semester as compared to the general FTIAC population who completed an average of 13 credits. A total of 47% of foster youth withdrew from one or more courses during their first semester of college, compared to 18% of FTIAC freshmen. Foster youth also had significantly lower end-of-first-semester GPAs ($M = 2.34$, $sd = .99$) compared to other FTIAC students ($M = 2.85$, $sd = .86$) at the same institution ($t = 4.58$, $df = 78$, $p < .0001$). This means that students from foster care performed less well than their peers by the end of the first semester of college. The end-of-semester performance gap, however, parallels the observed differences in ACT and high-school GPA scores at the time of admission.

3.3. Limitations

The research design for this exploratory study was a one-group cross sectional survey and is thus subject to the usual limitations of such a design. A noteworthy limitation is selection bias with respect to our sample of former foster youth. As discussed earlier, most foster youth do not make it to college. Our sample earned high-school GPAs and ACT scores that were necessary to gain admittance to a four-year college. This notable achievement alone suggests the 81 students from foster care in our sample may have perceived themselves as better prepared for college than other foster youth whose academic qualifications limited them to community colleges or other post-secondary educational programs. Moreover, students in our sample had enrolled in a comprehensive college support program that provided support in the areas of education, finances, housing, health, socialization, identity development, and life skills. However, since they did not begin this program until after completing the CSI, program enrollment could not have affected the students' perceptions, but it is possible that students' expectations of the program may have played a role in their ratings.

Another limitation is that the study measured self-perceptions of readiness for college prior to starting the college experience; therefore, the findings of the study are best understood as a measure of the students' intentions and not their actions: how they *think* they will feel and behave regarding their college coursework based on their high-school experiences and any limited exposure to college life.

4. Discussion

The results of this study show that foster youth who have been accepted into a four-year college perceive themselves as being as well prepared as the general freshman population on 6 out of 17 scales, and better prepared on 9 out of 17 scales measuring college readiness (see Table 1). In addition, students from foster care perceive themselves as having much less family support and being less receptive to career counseling than the general freshman population. The results suggest that foster youth admitted and on their way to a four-

year university have an optimistic outlook on their college futures; however, their first semester performance lagged behind other FTIAC freshmen. Other studies have shown that students from foster care are far less likely to persist in college to degree completion than their non-foster-care peers (Day et al., 2011; Wolanin, 2005). Next we discuss the results by exploring foster youths' perceptions of their readiness to engage in college in the context of their academic performance and foster care experience.

4.1. College readiness

4.1.1. Academic motivation

More positive attitudes toward educators and a stronger desire to finish college among students from foster care indicate that these youth may have had a more favorable perception of college than their peers. Life in foster care can be chaotic, with placement changes, other foster children moving in and out of a home, unsuccessful family reunification attempts, changes in caseworkers, and other transitions. Consequently, foster youth may view college as a "safe haven" where life is perceived as more predictable and structured, and a place where they will have more control over personal decisions.

Additionally, foster youth may view education as a means of escaping the living arrangements of their youth. For example, Day (2009) describes how as a foster child she anchored her focus on school as a way to feel normalcy while coping with the mental illness of her mother, living in foster care, and being "reunited" with her father after he had been absent for a long period of time. Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) postulate that foster youth who enter higher education may have resilience and ambition stemming from a desire to defy the negative outcomes associated with foster care and to create a different life for themselves than that of their parents.

Whatever the source of optimism for higher academic motivation reported by foster youth, it may be offset by lower academic preparation (i.e., lower ACT and high school GPA) and lower academic performance (i.e., lower fall semester college GPA) as compared to their non-foster care peers. For example, lower fall semester GPAs limit access to competitive opportunities on college campuses that specify a minimum GPA, such as, employment, internships and entrance to a major. Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008) learned that adults who had grown up in foster care and experienced multiple placements developed a guarded optimism about their futures that seemed to reflect a sense of hopefulness more so than a sense of confidence that their life circumstances would improve.

4.1.2. Social motivation

High self-reliance among our sample can be understood in the context of the foster-care experience. Foster youth learn at a young age to protect themselves from further disappointment, rejection, and loss that is all too common given the temporary nature of foster care. Forms of self-protection by foster youth manifest in keeping relationships superficial and projecting pseudo-independence or a false front that often negatively impact their long-term planning skills (Kools, 1999). In other words, they project great confidence but can lack competence — especially in planning for the future.

Underlying these compromised skills is varying degrees of trauma from repeated incidents of abuse, neglect or rejection over extended periods of time. Trauma can impact regulation of biological systems, and chronic stress negatively impacts learning, memory, and executive functioning (van der Kolk, 2005). Such heightened levels of stress or distress over extended periods of childhood also can affect one's ability to regulate emotions, cognition, learning, and interpersonal relationships (Avery & Freundlich, 2009).

Prior studies have suggested that foster youth develop a survivalist sense of self-reliance as they are prematurely conferred with adult status and independence and must interface with multiple bureaucratic systems such as human services, community mental health,

and health care (Geenan & Powers, 2007). Cross-communication between and among these systems is often complex and impeding when it comes to young people receiving services. For example, caseworkers, community mental health professionals and health insurance providers process requests for services on behalf of foster youth. To receive needed services, the young person must rely upon multiple professionals who are accountable to different offices, and are not always responsive to foster youth in a timely manner. Foster youth learn to take care of themselves by developing a sense of "survivor pride," which prevents them from depending on others or expressing personal and psychological vulnerability because such expression poses a risk to their sense of independence and sense of personal success (Samuels & Price, 2008).

4.1.3. Receptivity to student services

While the challenges of growing up in conditions that lead to foster-care and foster care placement itself produce many adverse effects on youth development, the experience also strengthens young people in many ways. For one, foster youth have had increased exposure to certain types of helping professionals at a young age, and this may explain their increased receptivity toward academic assistance, personal counseling, and social activities on campus. Foster care programs are less likely to arrange for foster youth to receive career counseling than counseling to aid with academics, personal or social struggles during the foster care experience, and this lack of familiarity may explain lower ratings of receptivity to career counseling.

Given their foster care experiences, foster youth have a great deal of familiarity with having professionals (e.g., caseworkers, attorneys, mental health professionals) and paraprofessionals (e.g., foster parents, mentors) involved in their lives. Furthermore, most services offered to children while in foster care are designed to address presenting problems (e.g., poor school performance, behavioral problems, poor socialization with peers) and not future-oriented planning (e.g., college preparation, career planning). As such, it is possible that foster youths' responses to questions about receptivity to career counseling may be more a reflection of their familiarity with support services than receptivity to them.

The results of this study do not shed light on why students from foster care, compared to a general freshman population, reported less receptivity to career counseling than other forms of counseling, and further study on this difference may provide greater insight and understanding to how this population of students perceives college and campus-based support services. Assuming that low receptivity of career counseling by foster youth was accurately measured, we offer two hypotheses. First, results on this career-counseling-receptivity scale seemed predictable, as 75% of respondents confidently rated that they had identified at least one occupation that fits well with their personality and interests, and 69% of them indicated their college plans were directed towards achieving occupational goals. Consequently, it is possible that foster youth may believe career counseling services are inessential since they have established career goals. It is worth noting that this finding is not consistent with studies that report a majority of college students are uncertain about their career choices when they enter college (Cueso, 2005).

A second hypothesis that addresses the low receptivity to career counseling may have to do with the survivalist mentality developed by foster youth discussed earlier. Upon entrance to college, it may be that foster youth are intensely focused on what is needed in the immediate to adapt to the new surroundings and expectations of college life. Questions addressing one's willingness to talk to professionals for the purposes of enhancing academics, personal counseling needs and social experiences in college fit well with the worries and questions of new students transitioning to college for the first time. In contrast, questions about willingness to engage in career counseling fit better with the end-goal of college. Therefore, it may be that foster youth answering the questions about receptivity to services, were innately triaging the type of help most needed during the start-up phase of their college careers.

It is important to note that receptivity to services may not correlate well to actual service utilization for students from foster care. The foster-care experience presents paradoxes for youth in which they are expected to leave care prepared to live independently, yet are afforded minimal opportunity to practice skills of self-determination while in care (Geenan & Powers, 2007). Previous studies on help-seeking behaviors suggests that foster youth have high incidences of physical and mental health problems, yet they are no more likely to utilize available professional services than their non-foster care peers residing in the same neighborhoods (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005).

One study showed that mental-health service usage rates by foster youth dropped 60% between the month prior to leaving care and the month after care (McMillen & Raghavan, 2009). Former foster youth are less likely to have health insurance, which can explain differences in service utilization (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Young people from foster care, therefore, may express a willingness to participate in academic counseling and social support services on campus, but they may not have developed the skills needed to fully access and utilize them.

4.1.4. General coping

Low family support for students from foster care is a finding of this study that may be in contrast to other research reporting that many foster youth who age out still feel connected to one or more family members (Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005). There is general agreement that foster youth experience less familial support when it comes to tangible assistance such as shelter and/or financial assistance (Courtney et al., 2010; Iglehart, 1995). Aside from family support, students from foster care in this study did not differ from the general freshman population on other coping scales, which included a sense of financial security, openness, ease of transition, and career planning. Financial security has been raised as a concern in other research (Davis, 2006), and it may be that the full tuition scholarship included in the campus-based support program positively affected ratings by participants in the sample. Nevertheless, the finding of low family support raises two important questions: (1) How essential is family support to college students' success?, and (2) to what degree can campus-based student services and activities mitigate any negative impact of absent or adverse family support?

Most foster youth are first in their families to attend college. As first-generation college students, they must figure out how to navigate the complex path to and through college with little help from family members who are ill-equipped to assist with maneuvering through this system and/or contributing financial resources and social connections (Jehangir, 2010). Additionally, students who age out of foster care bring to the college experience cumulative trauma that stems from abuse or neglect by parents, removal from their families by child protective services, multiple foster-care placements, and multiple school changes.

Furthermore, many youth who grow up in the foster care system suffer from complex trauma, which accounts for the dual problem of exposure to multiple traumatic events over time and the effect of this exposure on immediate and long-term developmental outcomes (van der Kolk, 2005). Research on complex trauma explains that long-term exposure to stress, such as when children fear for their physical safety and/or experience ongoing distress related to their physical and emotional well-being, results in physiological changes to brain functioning that last well into adulthood (Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2003).

Individuals with complex trauma are more likely to have difficulty with attachment, affect regulation, cognition, and behavior control. Moreover, we hypothesize that daily stressors of college life can “trigger” deep-seated unresolved issues that were the source of the stress. For example, when a college student from foster care finds that she is \$25 short of funds to purchase the books needed for classes, she is reminded that her parents are not there for her to call and ask for the difference, and this memory may trigger unresolved emotional

distress related to abuse and neglect, removal from her parents, and feelings of rejection or unworthiness. Such emotional triggers unravel fears and hurt that trace back into childhood and can paralyze the student in a way that prevents her from resolving the seemingly minor problem of a \$25 shortfall.

Arnett (2000) suggests that 40% of emerging adults move back into their parents' homes and then out again at least once between 18 years and 25 years of age. The need to return home is likely no different for students from foster care, particularly during university closure periods such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and inter-session or semester breaks. Most youth aging out of foster care do not have permanent homes after their cases are closed and thus find themselves returning to families and neighborhoods from which they were once removed. For some foster youth, returning “home” provides an opportunity to reconnect with family or heal old wounds, but for many it is a return to the same problematic and chaotic conditions from which they were separated.

Complicating matters further is the fact that foster youth who reconnect with biological family as young adults, and after living in foster care for extended periods, have had their developmental growth and relationships within family interrupted. For example, a foster youth whose parental rights were terminated at age 12 years old who reconnects with biological family at 18 years old must learn to relate to family members as a young adult all the while carrying the wounds of family separation that were afflicted at a young age. In turn, the family members, parents in particular, are faced with the challenge of relating to a young adult instead of the 12-year old child who was taken from them and placed into child protective custody.

Family support experienced by students from foster care has been discussed by others in terms of the value that family relationships have in giving young people needed social and/or human capital to navigate their young adult years (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Young people receive this social and human capital by way of complex social mechanisms that parents garner to advance their children's chances of success in life, and it is an interpersonal resource upon which individuals draw to enhance opportunities in life (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Courtney, 2009). John Seita (2001), a youth-development researcher and former foster youth, uses the term “family privilege” to describe the social capital differential between foster youth and youth who come from intact and stable families. Like other forms of privilege, family privilege provides young adults a set of advantages over foster youth in the same social, political, and economic arenas, including college.

4.2. Implications

4.2.1. Research

This study adds to the literature by highlighting foster youths' readiness to engage in college and comparing their readiness to the general population of freshman students. With the proliferation of campus-based programs supporting students from foster care on two- and four-year college campuses, researchers will have more opportunities to study this uniquely vulnerable and under-served population. It is important that future research include variables to measure the foster-care experience itself, since foster youth can vary on many factors such as age of entry into the foster care system, number and type of foster care placements they have received, and level of support from foster family after their cases are closed. The variation in childhood histories and foster care experiences likely influence the degree of academic motivation, social motivation, receptivity to services and coping among former foster-care youth in the young adult years.

Foster-care research strongly suggests that the aspirations of foster youth do not match up to their behaviors or actions; that is, intentions do not automatically translate into actions. And, since this study measured perception and not action, further studies of a longitudinal nature are needed to determine if students from foster care are more or less likely to actually utilize campus-based services and supports

compared to their non-foster-care student peers. Including a wider range of psychological variables and their effects on the coping strategies of students from foster care would also increase understanding of how best to assist these students when obstacles that interfere with academic progress arise.

4.2.2. Practice

The findings of this study shed light on how child welfare and education professionals can address the needs of students from foster care. Past research studies have strongly made the case that students from foster care have a high risk of dropping out of college. Lack of family privilege, the premature launch into independence, financial difficulties, housing instability and lack of access to health care are among the significant barriers that students from foster care must tackle above and beyond the normal stresses of college life. Educating child welfare and college professionals about the unique educational obstacles faced by students from foster care as well as their higher-than-average levels of academic and social motivation and openness to academic and counseling services can give these professionals a better perspective on how to engage this unique student group. Early engagement with foster youth in college is critical since foster youth may possess greater confidence than competence to engage in the college environment.

The Appendix provides a selective list of policy and practice resources prepared by [Casey Family Programs \(2010b\)](#) that can inform professionals about the needs of, and the supports and programs for, students from foster care who are often a hidden and fragmented population on college campuses.

Professionals working in ways to support college students from foster care must be skillful in engaging students and eliciting relevant information to perform the job of assisting students in need. [Casey Family Programs \(2009\)](#) has developed recommendations for financial-aid staff about sensitive approaches to communication with students from foster care and unaccompanied homeless youth. For example, they suggest that students from foster care find it helpful when college staff professionals conduct conversations that include asking personal questions in environments where they cannot be overheard; take time to explain questions and make sure students understand the answers before ending the interaction, walk students through next steps (e.g., completion of a form, escort to next department and introduce them to someone before leaving); and follow up with students via e-mail, text or phone, to ensure they completed all steps. These strategies for engaging and assisting students from foster care apply to social-service and campus professionals, and have application for college students in general ([Casey Family Programs, 2009](#)); however, underlying the success of these strategies is ensuring that student-service professionals should not assume that students from foster-care have families – or the benefits of family privilege – to help them.

5. Summary

This descriptive study provides a portrait of foster youths' readiness to engage in college in the summer prior to their freshman year at a four-year university, as well as performance outcomes after their first semester. The findings show that youth aging out of foster care are similar to the general freshman population in their academic confidence and in several areas of coping. They are different than their peers in that they report being generally more academically and socially motivated, as well as more receptive to student services in the areas of academics, personal counseling, and social enrichment. Foster youth also differ from their freshman peers as they are less receptive to career counseling, have less family support, and perform less well academically upon entrance to college and after the first semester as freshmen.

It is likely that getting a college education provides a fresh start – or an avenue to – a better life, which is a view that is shared by other

first generation college students ([Jehangir, 2010](#)). This view may have students from foster care feeling optimistic about receiving help at the start of college. We postulate that the increased academic and social motivation among students from foster care is fueled more by a sense of guarded optimism or hopefulness that things will get better versus a sense of confidence built gradually from consistent adult guidance during the successes and challenges of the adolescent years. Adding to this vulnerability is the fact that students from foster care begin college with lower ACT and high-school GPA scores than their peers, and this academic achievement gap persists in the first semester of college.

The combination of higher motivation to engage academically and socially with low family support, average coping skills and poorer academic performance may be the perfect storm leading to academic failure and college drop out. The risk of dropping out of college may be increased by relying too much on oneself and not enough on others, and projecting a pseudo-independence developed during the time growing up in foster care. Child welfare workers may mistakenly perceive the optimism or hopefulness that foster youth display at the start of college as a sign of competence that they have successfully achieved independence, while college professionals may overlook foster youth needs if they view the students through a lens of family privilege that does not exist for them. Thus, outreach by professionals is needed to help students from foster care transition to using campus-based services versus child-welfare services, and to provide additional guidance through the many practical and developmental challenges of the college years.

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Appendix

Selected resources on college students from foster care

1. *An overview of post-secondary support programs for former foster youth* (2007). Ball State University, Muncie, IN. www.bsue.edu/ssrc/guardianscholars
2. *A road map for learning: Improving educational outcomes in foster care* (2007). Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/RoadMapForLearning.htm
3. *Blueprint for change: Education success for children in foster care* (2008). Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, American Bar Association. www.abanet.org/child/education
4. Casey Life Skills, Assessment Supplements, Education Level IV, Post Secondary. www.caseylifefskills.org/pages/assess/assess_supplement.htm
5. Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) information by state. www.statevoucher.org
6. *Federal laws that increase educational opportunities for older youth in out-of-home care* (2009), Legal Center for Foster Care & Education. www.abanet.org/child/education
7. *Foster youth educational planning guide* (2009). California College Pathways. www.cacollegepathways.org
8. *It's my life: Employment* (2006). Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLifeEmployment.htm
9. *It's my life: Housing* (2006). Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLifeHousing.htm
10. *It's my life: Postsecondary education and training and financial aid excerpt* (2006). Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/IMLPPostsecondaryEd.htm
11. *Life in the Hood: Adulthood 101 – A Guide to Living, Studying and Working on Your Own* (2007), Orphan Foundation of America,

Sterling Virginia, 1–10 copies \$15.00/copy. http://orphan.org/fileadmin/pdf/OFA_Life_In_Hood_Sell_Sheet.pdf

12. *Providing Effective Financial Aid Assistance to Students from Foster Care and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: A Key to Higher Education Access and Success* (2009). Tracy Fried & Associates. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ProvidingEffectiveFinancialAid.htm
13. *Supporting success: Improving higher education outcomes for students from foster care – A Framework for Program Enhancement* (2008). Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/SupportingSuccess.htm
14. *The Chafee educational and training voucher (ETV) program: Six states' experiences* (2008). National Foster Care Coalition and Casey Family Programs. www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ETV.htm

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