When Foster Youth Go to College: Assessing Barriers and Supports to Degree Completion for College Students with Foster Care Histories

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TAKEAWAYS

Understanding barriers to success can help college campuses address persistent obstacles that thwart degree completion.

Students with foster care backgrounds were less likely than low-income, first-generation students to persist through their first year and complete a degree in six years.

Three significant barriers to degree completion were identified: economic hardship, needing to work a lot of hours while taking courses, and being a parent.

Young people with foster care histories are a small but important subpopulation of college students. Unlike most college students, those with foster care histories often navigate the transition to adult independence and financial self-sufficiency with minimal support from kin. Attaining a college degree, however, can be a powerful determinant for their health and well-being later in life. To support students with foster care backgrounds into and through higher education, we need to identify potential barriers so they can be addressed and identify potential promoters so they can be bolstered.

In this study, we compare degree-completion outcomes of college students with foster care histories in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin to a meaningful comparison group: low-income, first-generation college students.[1] We then investigate factors that promote and hinder the chances of graduating from college among students with foster care backgrounds. Insights generated by this work can help child welfare departments and college recruitment and retention offices to properly identify students who may benefit from strategic engagement, supplemental mentorship, and informational support.
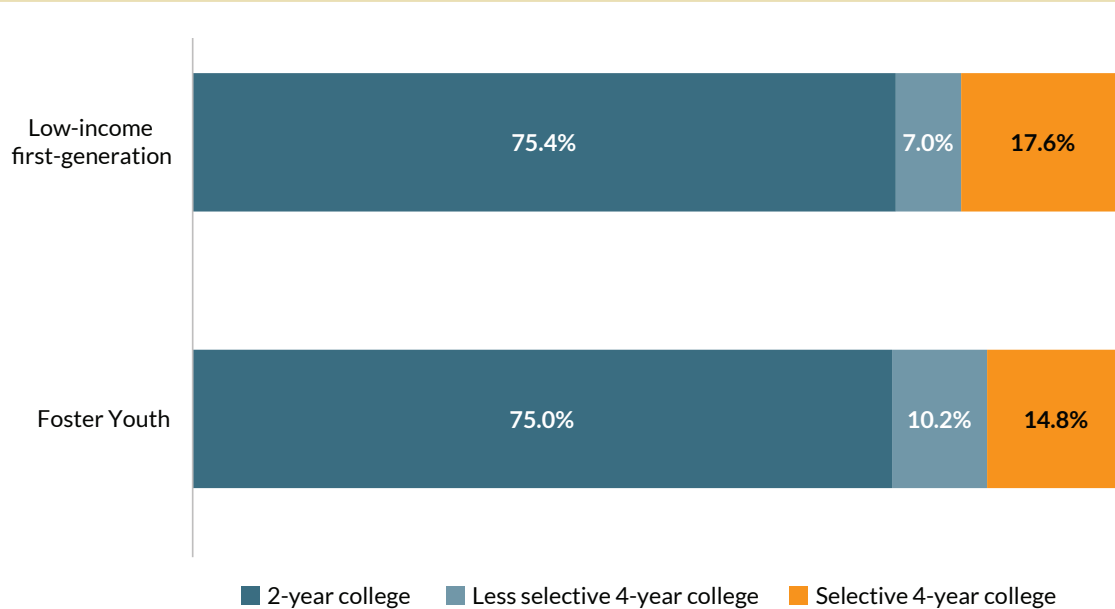
> Characteristics of a college and its student body can play important roles in student performance, independent of student characteristics.

Educational Preparation and Success

Philanthropic organizations, federal and state legislators, and nonprofit organizations have increasingly focused on foster youth as an important subgroup of adolescents and emerging adults.[2] However, prior research on the subpopulation of college students with foster care experience is scant relative to the extensive scholarship on the general population of college students. Most of what we know comes from qualitative studies that interviewed a small number of students with care experience, but these studies are not intended to produce generalizable findings. A couple of quantitative studies identified several factors detrimental to educational success for former foster youth, which include: early parenthood, substance use problems, physical or learning disabilities, a history of repeating grades, and placement in a congregate care setting (vs. foster care home).[3] Conversely, factors found to increase the odds of educational success for foster youth include students' own educational aspirations, higher reading proficiency, early work experience, and receipt of significant preparation while still in foster care. Social engagement (e.g., frequent attendance at college social events) has also been positively associated with degree completion.[4] These existing studies suffer from one or more limitations, such as not having a clear and representative sample, poor response rate, and not focusing exclusively on college degree completion.

Figure 1. Comparison of First College Attended, by Type, for Low-Income, First-Generation Students and Foster Youth. Differences between the Two Groups Are Not Statistically Significant.

	2-year college	Less selective 4-year college	Selective 4-year college
Low-income first-generation	75.4%	7.0%	17.6%
Foster Youth	75.0%	10.2%	14.8%

- 2-year college
- Less selective 4-year college
- Selective 4-year college

Sources:Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 23*(1), 28-54.

Our study addresses these issues by analyzing data from a longitudinal study (i.e., the Midwest Study) of youth in three Midwestern states and linking it to college records from the National Student Clearinghouse when study participants were about 29 years old. As a first step, we compare college persistence rates and degree completion rates of Midwest Study participants to those of a nationally representative sample of first-generation, low-income students. We then evaluate a wide range of pre-entry factors (i.e., student background prior to college entry) and post-entry factors (i.e., participant characteristics after college entry) to identify factors that increase and decrease the likelihood of Midwest Study college students completing a 2-year or 4-year degree. We also investigate institutional factors as predictors of degree completion, a focal area missing from other research on this subpopulation. Characteristics of a college and its student body can play important roles in student performance, independent of student characteristics.

Sustained and consistent social support—or relational permanency—can be very influential.

Findings

As seen in Figure 1, most students with foster care histories in our sample attended a 2-year college, while far fewer attended either a very-selective or less-selective 4-year college. Although the types of college that Midwest Study participants attended are similar to those attended by low-income, first-generation students, there are stark differences in persistence and degree completion rates. Nearly three-quarters of low-income, first-generation college students persisted through their first year of college compared to less than half of foster youth. In terms of degree completion, low-income, first-

generation students were more than twice as likely as foster youth to have completed a 2- or 4-year degree program within 6 years of initial enrollment.

Our regression analyses point to several factors influencing the expected odds of students with foster care experience completing a college degree. We find that three post-enrollment factors play a particularly large role as barriers to degree completion: needing to work full time, being a parent, and facing economic hardships. Each of these factors independently decreased the expected likelihood that students earned a college degree. Figures 2, 3, and 4 display the rates at which Midwest Study participants encountered each of these factors.

Institutional factors also played a roll in the likelihood of degree attainment among Midwest Study participants. Increased institutional expenditures on academic support, student services, and instruction each increased the odds of degree completion. A higher rate of Pell Grant recipients at an institution was associated with increased likelihood of degree completion while, conversely, institutions with higher rates of part-time students predicted lower odds of degree attainment.

Figure 2. Post-Enrollment Employment (N = 329).
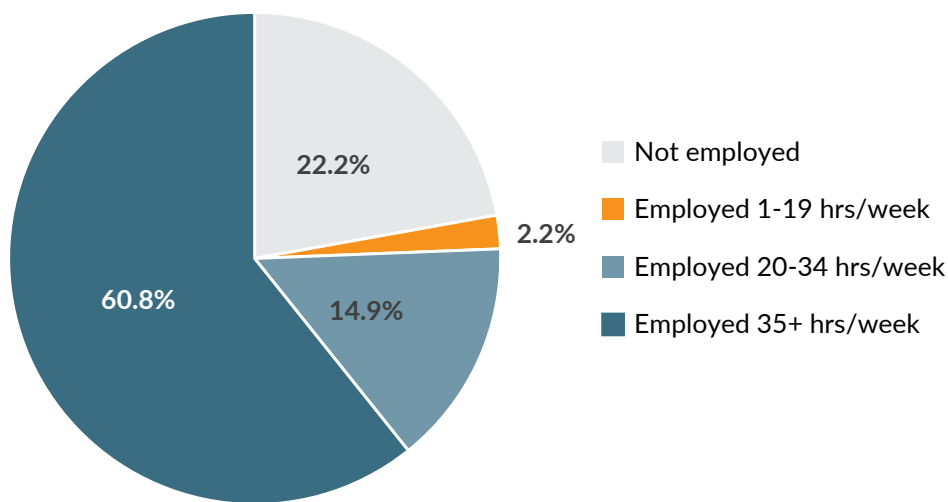
Source: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 23*(1), 28-54.

Figure 3. Post-Enrollment Parental Status (N=329).
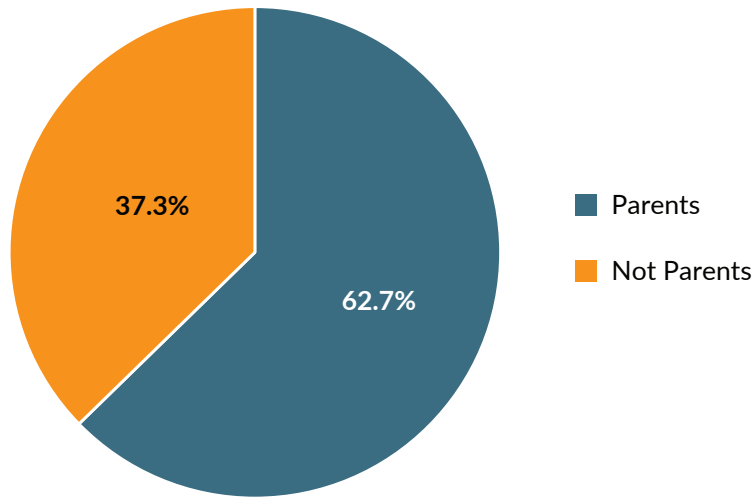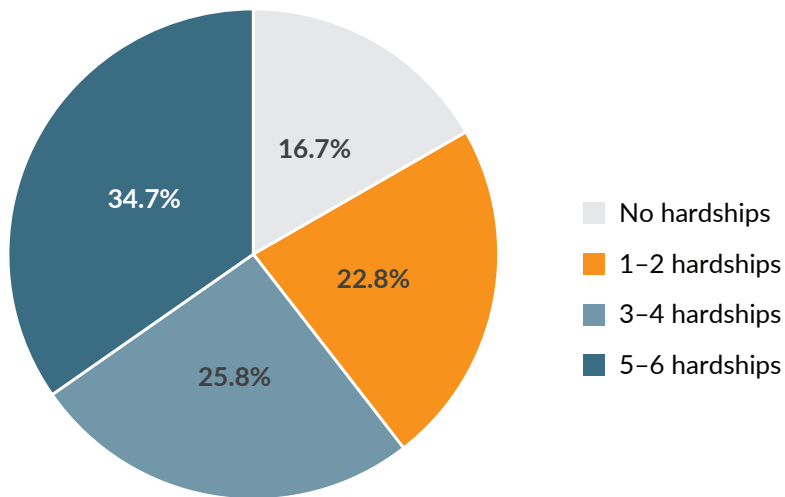

- Parents — 62.7%
- Not Parents — 37.3%

Source: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 23*(1), 28-54.

Figure 4. Economic Hardships Faced by Students, Post-Enrollment (N = 329).

- No hardships — 16.7%
- 1–2 hardships — 22.8%
- 3–4 hardships — 25.8%
- 5–6 hardships — 34.7%

Source: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 23*(1), 28-54.

Gender, age, and social support were also significant predictors of degree completion. Women were more likely to earn a degree than men, and youth who enrolled in college prior to age 19 were more likely to earn a degree than older enrollees. Social support was one of the few pre-entry factors positively associated with degree completion. As researchers Sarah Font and Angelique Day both noted in a recent IRP webinar on the topic of supporting youth exiting foster care, sustained and consistent social support—or relational permanency during and after exit—can be very influential.[5]

> Young adults with foster care histories face a unique set of challenges above and beyond those of other groups that universities and colleges often identify as "at risk" of dropping out.

Practice and Policy Implications

How can child welfare departments and colleges best support former foster youth? First, adequate information and guidance for adolescents still in foster care is critical in helping choose a college that is a good fit. Many factors shape a student's college choice (e.g., academic performance, location, reputation, affordability), but the findings from this study suggest that students were more likely to graduate from schools with higher investments in support services. While we have found post-enrollment factors as particularly important, high-quality guidance in the high school years aimed at identifying good-fit institutions also sets the stage for later success.[6]

Next, schools must know which students fit the criteria for enhanced support. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which colleges encourage all incoming students to fill out regardless of financial need, is the portal through which students can apply for federal student aid, including grants, work-study funds, and loans. But not all youth with care experience complete the FAFSA, taking them out of the running for potential need-based funding (e.g., Pell Grants) and making it hard for colleges to identify these students. Colleges should add two supplemental questions to the college application packet to help identify students with foster care experience. One would ask about an applicant's history of foster care involvement and a second would identify the age at which the applicant was last in foster care. This will ensure these students receive financial assistance such as Pell Grants, $5,000 per year Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs), and college tuition and fee waivers (in states that have them) that can reduce financial strain from economic hardships, needing to work full time, and costs associated with being a parent.

Finally, campus-based support programs—for example, the Seita Scholars program at Western Michigan University—can also help students overcome post-enrollment challenges.[7] More than 30 states have at least one 4-year college offering programs for foster youth; the Guardian Scholars program at University of California system schools is one example. California, along with Michigan and Washington, have implemented statewide programs with a range of academic, financial, social, and logistical supports.[8] Such programs are designed to serve young people with histories of trauma and are often available to young adults even after aging out of foster care services.[9]

Summary

Our study found foster youth much less likely to complete a degree program than low-income, first-generation students, a student subgroup that has been identified in higher

education as being at greater risk of dropout. Such results reinforce the premise that young adults with foster care histories face a unique set of challenges above and beyond those of other groups that universities and colleges often identify as "at risk" of dropping out.

Future research needs to investigate disparate pathways students with foster care experience take through college. Financial supports and on-campus support programs for foster youth offer promising avenues to success in the face of persistent challenges, but more research is needed to identify the kinds and levels of support that are most effective. College administrators, lawmakers, and foster care advocates can and should implement policies and practices to reduce barriers that aim to promote long-term success for students with care histories. This is especially the case at 2-year institutions, where youth with care histories most commonly enroll.■

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Sources & Methods

Type of analysis: Quantitative secondary analysis

Data Source: Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (i.e., Midwest Study, PI: Mark Courtney) and the Beginning Postsecondary Survey Longitudinal Study. College records for degree completion (i.e., outcome) measure obtained from National Student Clearinghouse.

Type of data: Longitudinal surveys

Sample definition: Youth eligible if 17 years old in 2002, lived in one of the three designated Midwestern states (i.e., Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin), and had been in foster care for at least one year prior to 17th birthday.

Time frame: Baseline interviews conducted in 2002–2003 with follow-up every two years until 2011 (when population was 25–26 years old).

Limitations: Generalizability to foster youth in other geographic locations is uncertain. Information on specific courses in which students were enrolled (and thus which may influence progress toward completion), was unavailable. Low number of participants limited statistical power. Students' academic histories were not available but may have provided more nuanced understanding of otherwise self-reported data.

[1]Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *23*(1), 28–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118791776

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