

Higher Education as the Lifeline to Social Mobility for Former and Current Foster Youth

Highlights

This report represents the preliminary results of a two-year study which examines the well-being, resilient qualities, social support needs, and academic support needs of former and current foster youth attending college. The results of this study lay the groundwork for institutions of higher education to partner with child welfare agencies to develop targeted academic support programs.

Participants (N=74):

- **Gender:** 84% female; 16% male
- **Age:** 20.6
- **Year:** 10% freshman; 24% sophomores; 31% juniors; 26% seniors; 10% recent graduates
- **Institution type:** 4-year public university (68%); 4-year private (16%); 2-year community college (12%); vocational school (4%)
- **Major:** 30% social science; 21% science and technology; 14% education, 18% business or a professional program (e.g. nursing, social work); 12% theatre
- **GPA:** 86.4% GPA of over 2.5; 31.6% GPA of 3.5 or greater
- **Living arrangement:** 29% on campus; 71% off campus

- **Age at Foster Care Entry:** 6.8 years
- **Reason for removal:** Parental substance abuse (47%); physical neglect or physical abuse (36.5%); lack of supervision (30%); parental domestic violence (16%); and medical neglect (12%)
- **Siblings:** 68% 3 or more siblings; 41% 5 or more siblings
- **Permanency:** 40.6% legally adopted; 36.5% DCFS guardianship; 18.9% relative guardianship

Notable Findings:

- **Students are confident and doing well academically:** Over 85% report a GPA over 2.5; nearly 1/3 report a GPA between 3.5 and 4.0.
- **Participants perceive themselves as “self-confident” and “resourceful”.**
- **Study skills and time management skills** are rated lower than other skills.

- **Financial aid is the #1 most useful resource.**
- **Females represent 84% of the study sample and 71% of YIC/YIS recipients.**
- **Female students express more resilience:** Females reported *greater enthusiasm, influence on others, and more willingness to seek out help* than male students.
- **Desired connection and support from foster and adoptive families:** Desire for emotional comfort, time spent together, and access to resources when needed.
- **Childhood physical neglect** associated with clinical levels of **depression and anxiety.**
- **Students from public institutions expressed more resilience:** Students from public institutions scored higher on *self-discipline, focus, time management, influence, determination, and help-seeking.*

Academic Performance Predictors

- ***Campus involvement* associated with *academic performance*:** Students with higher cumulative GPAs (3.0 +) had greater involvement in campus activities.
- ***Social support* associated with *academic performance*:** Students with higher GPAs expressed higher social support levels compared to students with lower cumulative GPAs.
- ***Financial need* associated with *academic support needs*:** Students who expressed financial support needs were more likely to require help with study skills, writing, test taking.

Recommendations:

- More systematic and **comprehensive data collection:**
 - No mechanisms to assess the academic performance of students who exited their institutions of higher education before degree completion
 - No current mechanism to assess the grades and well-being of students who attend college without the financial support of IDCFS
 - No mechanism to assess well-being of young adults once emancipated
- High School college prep programming to ensure college readiness for more students
- Targeted college preparation, support, and mentoring for male students
- **Expanded financial aid** to support more academically talented students: Income insecurity can compromise students' focus on academics when they must work multiple part time jobs
- **On-campus psychological services** specific to students with history of maltreatment, trauma, family disruption

- **Training** for on campus mental health professionals and academic support staff
- **Coaching foster and adoptive parents with college bound students**
- More wide spread dissemination of information about college readiness programs and DCFS financial assistance

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