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Foster Youth Who Have Succeeded in Higher Education: Common Themes

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Little was known regarding the numbers of young people with disabilities served in foster care and the barriers such youth face in education and the transition to adulthood until the recent report by the National Council on Disability (NCD; 2008). It sheds light on the poor education and employment outcomes and other indicators of well-being for youth with disabilities in foster care. The NCD estimates that youth with disabilities are between 1.5 and 3.5 times more likely to have experienced abuse or neglect than youth without disabilities. In addition, children born with disabilities more frequently become part of state child welfare systems.

There are over 500,000 foster youth in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006). According to Yu, Day, and Williams (2002), in school, these young people are more likely than non-foster children to perform below grade level, score lower on state-wide achievement tests, repeat one or more grades, have high rates of absenteeism and

tardiness, and drop out of school. About 20,000 young adults age out of state foster care systems annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006). Like many youth with disabilities, youth transitioning out of foster care tend to have very poor postsecondary education and training enrollment and completion outcomes (NCD, 2008). They are less likely to take college preparatory courses; have access to special programs, advanced placement courses, and extracurricular activities; and pursue postsecondary education. However, with 70% of youth in foster care reporting a strong desire to go to college (Martin, 2003), the barriers to college access and success facing these students need to be better understood and addressed by policymakers and practitioners alike.

All young people, including foster youth and youth with disabilities, can succeed academically given adequate support and advocacy from educators, professionals, and their caregivers. Casey Family Programs (www.casey.org), a Seattle-based national operating foundation that has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966, interviewed eight former foster youth who recently graduated from college. With only about 3% of former foster youth earning a college degree (Pecora et al., 2005), these eight students had clearly beaten the odds. Their perspectives on going to college and obtaining a degree despite numerous barriers presents an opportunity learn how other young adults like them might be better supported. All were beneficiaries of the Casey Family Programs college scholarship program and supported by the Orphan Foundation of America (www.orphan.org). Of the eight students interviewed, five were female and three were male. Four were African American, two were Caucasian, one was Asian American, and one was Hispanic. All of them graduated from four-year universities. During the course of conversations and correspondences with them, 15 major themes concerning college success and a general outlook on life emerged:

1. *“I’ve been in more than one foster home.”* Most of the eight young adults had been placed in at least 4 or 5 situations; one had been in 20. Two of them were sent to group homes and family homes. This placement instability resulted in multiple school changes. These students entered foster care between the ages of 8 and 11 and, on average, were in the foster care system for 10 years. Two of the students had siblings who were placed with them temporarily; two students never lived with their brothers or sisters. Six students had been in their last foster situation for at least five years before going to college. Four of the eight had lived with a single mother for their last placement. Although none of the students reported that their foster situations were exemplary, they did view them as primarily positive experiences. Two young people even said that the foster system had saved their lives.
2. *“My family is important to me.”* For the most part, these youth valued what family they had. Three students held out the hope that someday they would reunite, to some degree, with their biological parents. Among the top goals of one young woman was spending more time with her biological family, with whom she had lost contact when she was a teenager. Another young woman tried to maintain contact with her immediate family, “Even when they get on my nerves.” One of the young men stated, “My family is very important to me. I didn’t feel I had the right to be 10 hours away from them [to attend a college].” One of the eight would not talk about her half-brother; however, in the past few years she has become very close to her younger sister. Another said that her brothers and sister are more important to her than anything else.
3. *“I could count on someone.”* One or two adults consistently supported these youth. For two students, the essential persons were their adoptive parents. For two others, it was an aunt: a biological aunt in one case and a foster aunt (the sister of the youth’s foster mother) in the other. One young man identified his grandparents, with whom he was placed when his foster parents were killed, as having the most influence. One young woman could always count on an older cousin: “I go to her when I have a

problem.” For yet another young woman, this “someone” was a group-home supervisor who encouraged her to attend college and supported her until she graduated. One young man said he depended on a coach.

4. *“I didn’t know how to study or manage my time.”* Although study skills and time management have been identified as keys to academic success, only two of the eight students appeared to have been provided with adequate instruction in these areas. Light (2001) found that college students’ top suggestion for entering freshmen was to obtain training in time management. In the area of study skills, one foster youth said that his teachers emphasized note-taking but nothing else. On the other hand, a second youth had an English teacher who, he said, stressed study skills and “put me in good shape for college.” A young woman stated that although a high school English teacher had offered this instruction, she didn’t pay attention. A second young woman noted that because she didn’t acquire good study skills in high school, she had great difficulty studying for college examinations. In fact, her only technique for learning was highlighting textbooks. All eight students admitted problems with managing their time in college.

5. *“I was involved in extracurricular activities.”* Most of the students participated in extracurricular activities while in high school. One student who didn’t have time in high school because of a part-time job came to see this as a deficit and actively changed her approach in college: “My objective was to get the most out of my college experience, academically and socially.” One young woman took honors classes, played tennis all four years, participated in track and field, and was a cheerleader. Her motivation for being so occupied was to escape her foster home. Higgins (1994) noted that such out-of-the-house involvement is quite common for “resilient” individuals.

6. *“Not every high school counselor was helpful.”* Six students were not satisfied with their high school counselor’s assistance. Four noted that when it came to determining which courses to take and when, the counselor merely gave them a list of the offerings and told them to handle the scheduling themselves. Only one student was encouraged to enroll in Advanced Placement classes. These students also did not get the necessary assistance for obtaining financial aid and completing the FAFSA. One young woman said, “Our guidance counselor . . . stayed in her office, and it was up to you to ask her questions.” A young man said that his school counselor “was a very negative person, not just with me, but with everybody.” One student who was pleased with her counselor said that she visited him frequently because “I really wanted to go to college and wanted to make sure that I did everything that needed to be done.” The other satisfied student said that even after high school his counselor stayed in contact with him.

7. *“I will do it!”* All these students told themselves that they would attend and graduate from college. One young woman said, “In high school, I figured that if I wanted to get myself out of the situation I was in, the best way to do it was to go to college.” Even when she felt under extreme pressure in college, she remained committed: “I never wanted to drop out; that wasn’t an option.” For another student, the motivation was financial: “I didn’t want to be poor forever.” Two young women took a year off after their junior year to work but returned and finished their programs. One young woman’s grades were quite low in a couple of classes during what would have been her senior year, but she redoubled her efforts and graduated a year later.

8. *“I have a plan.”* All eight students had charted the course of their lives to some degree. A few wanted generally to better themselves and take advantage of opportunities that arose. As one young woman said, “My life a year from now will be very busy, yet fulfilling . . . filled with anticipation of and excitement over future obstacles.” Several students planned to work toward master’s degrees or

attend law school. One of the eight hoped to own her own business; another wanted to pursue a career in music/video production. One young man's desire was to become involved with providing low-income housing. Still another youth had a detailed schematic, which she referred to as "the concrete plan for my life."

9. "*Money is important.*" Although these individuals received scholarships, grants, and loans, money was a constant worry. Five of the eight incurred considerable debt in attending college, one as much as \$70,000. One student confided, "One of my biggest worries is that I will not be able to support myself financially. . . . Because I do not receive any financial support from family and I do not live at home, I am completely responsible for myself." All of the students worked various jobs while in college, and, as mentioned previously, two took a year off to earn money for school.

10. "*I just hoped I didn't get sick.*" Only three of the eight youth had even minimal health insurance coverage while attending college, and most of them had no dental insurance. One young woman said that she had health insurance for the first time since she was 18 when she was a government intern: "I cannot tell you how many times I tried to get mental-health services when I was in college, because I was very depressed." Another student stated, "If anything could be changed [in the system] for children coming out of foster care, I would hope that it would be health-care coverage. We had state welfare from being in foster care, but once we were 18 . . . we were on our own."

11. "*I tried to do too much.*" At one time or another, each student overextended him- or herself or came very close to it. They struggled with particular classes, held down jobs, volunteered for various organizations, juggled finances, and worried about their foster and biological families. One young woman said, "I kind of thought I was 'superwoman.' I will do this, I will do that, I will take six classes and work." A young man was working on his master's degree in business, planning to earn a doctorate, organizing a private company to work for low-income housing, and serving as a county council member. Another student volunteered at a work shelter for foster youth, a county courthouse, an HIV resource center, and the YMCA, in addition to working part-time and taking a full course load.

12. "*Counseling is essential.*" These students were either involved in counseling, would have liked to have been, or should have been. As one student succinctly stated, "I was moving out of my first apartment, forced to quit my job, unable to focus on school, and sick like a dying dog. [This] left me barely able to pick up the phone and dial the student counseling services." Another student went to counseling just to sort out "stuff. . . . It's really a chance to get an objective voice on your feelings and just to validate how you feel." The director of the Guardian Scholars support program for foster youth at California State University, Fullerton, stated that most youth leaving foster care can become overwhelmed by having to care for themselves. Add to this common mental-health concerns, such as depression, and it is clear that they may need counseling (personal communication, May 10, 2004).

13. "*I used support services in college and wished there were more.*" These young people took advantage of a fair number of support services their colleges offered, especially financial aid, residence and academic advising, health services, student counseling, learning centers, computer labs, and sports and recreational opportunities. Services they would have liked to use but were not available included assistance with housing during holiday or vacation breaks, ways to connect with foster youth in college, and interactions with foster youth who had graduated and could act as mentors.

14. "*I feel older than I am.*" All eight had to grow up quickly, overcoming challenges that most young people never face. At age 22 or 23, several said they felt as though they were 35 or older. All the students knew they didn't have time to go to parties or waste time during college. A young woman said,

“At the beginning of my freshman year, I found a job and worked until I graduated from high school. While most of my peers and friends were out enjoying their youth, I was worrying about what to do with my life.”

15. *“I am ambivalent about depending on other people.”* One young woman confided, “I had a lot of people in my life who supported me, who were like family members, but you just cannot always depend on other people.” For example, she was skeptical of her relationship with her boyfriend, fearing he would leave her. A young man who said he is very cautious in choosing friends said, “I’ve had three or four friends that I had close relationships with, but everybody else I just considered acquaintances. Sometimes, when people don’t have the same goals you do, and if you get yourself affiliated with those people, you can get distracted. You might lose sight of your goals.”

An inevitable question concerning foster youth who have succeeded academically is “What do those individuals have in common?” The person who asks this question might want to find characteristics that he or she could instill in less successful young people, in the hopes of offering them improved opportunities to be successful. Although reasonable, this expectation may be naïve. The only trait shared by the eight young men and women we profiled was a persistent drive to succeed educationally, manifested in their graduation from college. Several reported that school was always a safe place where they could escape chaotic lives. They did, however, seem to share several similar experiences:

- First, an influential person or two—a foster parent, a cousin, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, a supervisor, a coach—came into their lives at critical times and encouraged them to do well in school. This stable, caring, and trusted educational advocacy made an important contribution to their college success.
- Second, they reported having lived in supportive homes just prior to attending college. Several had foster parents with college experience who aimed them in that direction.
- Finally, during their adolescence, these eight foster youth began telling their stories, either informally to teachers, social workers, or other adults, or formally, as members of youth panels that addressed groups of foster children. Relating these experiences helped them begin to understand themselves. Each came to the realization that he or she could accept the past, and each found illumination concerning the future.

These young people defied the odds, achieving academic success, earning a college degree, and becoming better prepared for life after foster care.

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A Mother's Story about Raising Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to understand a mother's perspective about raising children with disabilities. This was a unique case study because the mother was a highly educated advocate in the special education profession and the process was very educational for the researcher. A detailed description of the methodology is provided to encourage new researchers and doctoral candidates to study the area of parental perspectives in special education using participant-observer case studies.

Interview Experience

The interview process was a real eye-opener for me. I found it overwhelming and exciting. Before the first interview I was nervous and unsure about the procedure, and about my ability to conduct an adequate interview. However, most of my anxieties disappeared during the first interview with Diane. We met on campus because it was a convenient site for the both of us. We chose an empty classroom to