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# Students Who Experienced Foster Care are on Campus: Are Colleges Ready?

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*Though most youth in the foster care system aspire to attend college, few have the opportunity to do so. For myriad reasons, including lack of historical representation on college campuses, sub-par Pk-12 education, and postsecondary barriers to admissions, enrollment, and financial aid, most college students who experienced foster care depart college without earning a degree. As the barriers to college for this population of students emerges, postsecondary institutions are preparing their campuses for students with unique needs. This qualitative study explores how student affairs professionals in one university system support college students previously in foster care. Professionals and teams of professionals working at six different institutions across the university system participated in interviews that emphasized the ways campuses used resources to meet students' hierarchy of needs. Based on the results of this research, student affairs professionals support students' foundational physiological and safety needs in myriad ways. In doing so, student affair professionals add to the motivation necessary for students to move towards belonging, esteem, and actualization.*

**Keywords:** foster care, basic needs, postsecondary, qualitative research, Maslow

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Whether they recognize students as alumni of foster care or not, student affairs professionals (SAP) and other college personnel have probably worked, are currently working, and will continue to work with college students who experienced foster care (CSEFC). Foster care is an overarching term used to describe the temporary, out-of-home placement of youth who are removed from their home by court order, typically due to abuse or neglect (Children's Bureau, 2021). The foster care system (FCS) includes a web of public and private organizations (i.e., social services, Chafee Foundation), professionals (i.e., caseworkers, attorneys, counselors, transition specialists), and volunteers (i.e., court-appointed special advocates, relative placements) who act in the family and youth's best interest. While the 670,000 youth that transition in and out of the FCS annually (Children's Bureau, 2021) have unique experiences, there are similarities within this population. For example, most youth who experienced foster care aspire to attend college (Kirk et al., 2013). Though there is much more room to increase the educational attainment for this population of students across the Pk-16 (prekindergarten-college) continuum, more students who experienced foster care have access to college than ever before. While access has increased, this population of students is unseen on college campuses (Sydor, 2013).

CSEFC do not identify themselves for multiple reasons, including but not limited to their desire to destigmatize themselves as "foster kids" (Bederian-Gardner et.al., 2018), their hope to remain autonomous and independent in higher education (Berzin et.al., 2014), and the limited benefits to remaining in the foster care system (FCS) upon college matriculation. However, as this population of students has benefited from increased access to higher education, colleges and universities must ready themselves to meet their unique needs. In creating environments and policies that enhance the college experience for alumni of foster care, SAP and higher education administrators will also enhance the college experiences for other populations of students who have traditionally been more at risk for early departure (Day et al., 2013; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar et al., 2016). This qualitative research study sought to answer the following question: What are colleges and universities in one university system doing to support the matriculation, retention, progression, and graduation of college students who experienced foster care?

### **Literature Review**

The instability associated with the foster care system (FCS) coupled with the abuse and neglect youth endured impacts their cognitive and social development (Pears et al., 2018). Consequently, students who are in or

have experienced foster care enter educational settings with unique needs. More often than not, these students are in schools, classrooms, and with educators who are underqualified to meet their unique developmental needs.

### **Students in Foster Care in College**

Educational inequity for college students who experienced foster care (CSEFC) begins long before college matriculation. In fact, many students in the FCS do not have the same degree of academic preparation compared to their peers (Piel, 2018). Specifically, as a group, students in the FCS are less likely to attend prekindergarten, are disproportionately placed in special education settings, and are suspended and expelled from school more often than their peers, not in the foster care system (Chambers & Palmer 2010; Unrau et al., 2012). As a result of these and other barriers to Pk-12 education, including multiple homes and school transitions (Morton, 2015; Noonan et al., 2010), about 50% of students who experience foster care earn a high school diploma (Chambers & Palmer 2010). Despite their grossly inequitable experiences in Pk-12 public schools, most students who experience foster care aspire to attend college (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Increased access to college for everyone and specific federal and

state policies for CSEFC create more opportunities for college matriculation for this population of students than previously (Okpych et al., 2020).

Access without support is not an opportunity (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), and too often, those college students who experienced foster care matriculate to campuses that do not have the infrastructure or personnel to meet this group's unique challenges (Batsche et al., 2014; Day et al., 2013; Kinarsky, 2017). Unlike other students who might ease into campus life/engagement with their peers, CSEFC are more likely to rely on their independence. Therefore, they may need support building interpersonal relationships that will allow them to truly engage in campus life (Kinarsky, 2017; Rios & Rocco, 2014). As youth in foster care endured personal trauma, navigated the court and social services system, and experienced inequitable educational settings, many built the emotional resilience necessary to succeed as college students (Jones & Dean, 2020). Further, students who experienced foster care are more likely to advocate for themselves, feel comfortable living independently, and have high levels of self-efficacy (Batsche et al., 2014; Day et al., 2013). Jones and Dean (2020) report that CSEFC are less likely to prioritize alcohol and drug consumption and more likely to make inter-

personal connections with established personnel, including campus employers, faculty, and academic advisors.

### **Institutional Support**

Since many students who have experienced foster care have limited support from their families and/or the social service system, they benefit from various institutional supports from professionals in multiple functional areas (Johnson, 2019). College students, especially those who experienced foster care, benefit from policies, practices, and professionals that support traditional forms of student development and engagement (i.e., intramural sports, academic major club, and identity specific programming), as well as those that seek to meet students' basic needs and beyond (i.e., flexible housing schedules, on-campus food pantries, and personal wellness) (Gillum et al., 2018). Specifically, CSEFC benefit from additional funds to purchase books, lab supplies, or laptops. They also benefit from counseling and other health services that provide opportunities to explore the impact of trauma while learning ways to care for themselves differently (Bederian-Gardner et.al., 2018). Institutions can provide students with the opportunities, programs, and knowledge of resources they need to thrive in higher education settings (Piel, 2018).

### **Belonging**

While students who experienced foster care matriculate to college with increased levels of independence, most lack the interpersonal skills necessary to engage in multiple, meaningful ways with their peers (Bederian-Gardner et.al, 2018). Since CSEFC experienced fewer opportunities to belong (Piel, 2018), they have limited abilities to create peer relationships in college. The limited peer relationships impact their sense of belonging and often leaves CSEFC feeling like an outsider on campus (Jones & Dean, 2020). The social isolation that occurs has multiple impacts on students' college experiences (Strayhorn, 2018). Ultimately, the students' lack of belongingness can leave them struggling to adjust, progress, achieve goals, and persist to graduation (Strayhorn, 2018).

To increase a sense of belonging for CSEFC, some colleges and universities have created specific programs. These programs provide information regarding financial aid and academic support, but they also build a community of scholars and peers that leads to students' sense of belonging on campus (Kinarsky, 2017). Students interviewed found identity-based student organizations beneficial to their increased sense of confidence and belonging on their college campuses (Means & Pyne, 2017).

**Framework: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is a five-tier theory of human motivation where the foundation for actualization is basic needs. Often depicted as a hierarchical pyramid, the base must be satisfied for individuals to move to the next level. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy includes the following five levels: *physiological*, which includes air, food, shelter; *safety*, which includes physical and mental health, employment, personal security; *belongingness and love*, which include intimacy, connection, friendship; *esteem*, which includes respect, freedom, status, accomplishment; and *self-actualization*, which is the desire to meet grand potential. Though college matriculation and graduation are goals that connect to students' esteem and self-actualization, many CSEFC matriculate to postsecondary education without secure access to physiological needs. Before this group of students can meet their academic potential and experience the freedom and accomplishment of departing college with a degree, they are motivated at first to meet their needs for housing, food, employment, and health.

**Methods**

This qualitative research study sought to answer the following question: What are colleges and universities in one university sys-

tem doing to support the matriculation, retention, progression, and graduation of college students who experienced foster care? The researchers used qualitative research methods to explore the practices student affairs professionals implemented to support this population. In some cases, the researchers followed up interviews with campus tours of resources such as food pantries, clothing closets, and community gardens.

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

One university system in the southeast region of the United States has created an organization whose mission is to increase college access and success (measured by retention) for youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness. The organization supports this population of students by building a network of support across the system, including over 50, two, and four-year institutions. The goals of the organization are two-fold: provide every postsecondary institution with an on-campus liaison for students who experienced foster care or homelessness; build relationships among campus liaisons to increase sustainable practices that work. A list of campus liaisons is located on the organization's website. I used this list to contact campus liaisons (approximately 100 individuals working in higher education). 12 individuals responded; I scheduled interviews

with eight and met with liaisons from six institutions. Liaisons represented two and four-year colleges/universities and multiple functional areas within student affairs. See Table

1 below for more information regarding participants' institutions.

**Table 1. Institutional type and professional position of interviewees**

<b>Institutional Type</b>	<b>Approximate Student Enrollment</b>	<b>Position of Liaison(s) Interviewed</b>
Associate and Bachelor Degree Granting Public College	3,000	Disability Service Provider Counselor and Psychology Instructor; Director of Student Development
Associate and Bachelor Degree Granting Public College	5,500	Manager Adult Learning Counselor
Regional Comprehensive	7,000	Dean of Students
Regional Comprehensive	8,000	Director Academic Advising
Regional Comprehensive	22,000	Dean of Students
Research and Institute of Technology	27,000	Coordinator of Basic Needs Task Force Coordinator Parent and Family Programs

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I conducted the semi-structured interviews on-site in five of six cases and conducted one interview on the phone. I followed up on-site interviews with campus tours, during which we visited food and clothing pantries, residence halls, counseling centers, classroom spaces, and a community garden. I took notes during and after the interviews, then reviewed the notes before reading the transcripts. While reading the member-checked transcripts initially, I used in vivo coding techniques to create multiple codes that emphasized the words of the interviewees (Saldana

& Omasta, 2016). After completing this process for each of the interviews, I gathered the codes and looked for themes.

While reviewing data derived from the coding process, it became clear that many of the practitioners interviewed spoke about college students' hierarchy of needs. At this point in the coding process, another researcher and I analyzed the transcripts again, coding with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as a frame. We analyzed the transcripts independently and coded them with the following: **physiological** for data that included resources that met students' need for

food, shelter, and clothing; **safety** for data that included resources regarding personal security, employment, and health; **belongingness** for data that included resources to build friendships, and a sense of connection; **esteem** for data that included resources for freedom, recognition, status, and respect; and **self-actualization** for data that represents students' desire to achieve their potential. Upon completion of individual coding, we compared codes and generated a list of interviewee quotations that captured the essence of the code.

### Results

In reviewing the transcripts, it was evident that personnel worked diligently to increase students' access to physiological and safety needs. Doing so helped to create a sense of belonging on campus for this group of students. Further, the efforts to increase students' foundational, basic needs increased their motivation to move towards self-actualization. While institutions innovated solutions differently, the results of this study indicate that students, no matter where they attended college, had similar needs.

#### Physiological Needs

A noticeable similarity between programs was the emphasis each placed on students' basic needs. Each program emphasized

food, clothing, and housing. Each of the programs found creative ways to meet the students' basic needs, but the common themes were discretion, support, and campus community connection. Access to food was the most common basic need and programs found ways to minimize campus waste, increase visibility while being discrete, and incorporate the campus community into supporting pantries.

**Food.** Most of the programs have an established food pantry or a food mapping program. The premise behind both activities was to give students access to food:

I have not been a very big proponent of pizza party type of programs, but then I realized as I researched food insecurity a little bit that there can be a map out there for activities and events for students each week that have where students can go on and see what's happening and they can see if there is going to be food at an event.

The interviewees all agree that students who can have their basic needs met while utilizing food waste on campus was critical. One said, "The food pantry, it's stocked two ways—there's fresh food that goes in twice a week. There is a student group...and they recover leftover food from the dining halls, and they package it in individual meals."



The location of food pantries was another critical attribute. Most food pantries were in discrete locations, whether in a residence hall, church, or campus. One interviewee acknowledged that a local church “has a phenomenal food pantry” that students could utilize in the community. Another interviewee explained there were student organizations that adopt mini pantries across campus. He said, “We have one over in financial aid, one over in the student engagement center, and there’s probably like 6 or 7 of these mini pantries that basically invite people to take some and leave some.” Finally, many institutions had a 21st-century method of food-sharing. Meal plan sharing allows institutions to set up a system that will enable students to “donate” their unused meals to students in need. One dean of students described the process. He said, “We have an electronic system where you can go and donate your unused meal swipes. And a student can request those through an email. They can get up to 3 free swipes per semester.” An additional need commonly met by institutions for students in need was housing.

**Housing.** Unlike food, housing was a bit more complicated to provide to students. More often than not, housing was available for extreme emergencies, alternative spring breaks, or rent on a short-term basis. It usually involved multiple campus constituencies

such as HUD or campus housing. As a result, the complexities around providing this basic need were greater than providing food to students who may be hungry. In extreme emergencies such as abrupt homelessness or domestic violence, some of the programs offered additional support to students:

The emergency housing...is usually somebody where a situation changes where they just need to be housed pretty quickly, so um, there is a room in the residence hall that’s kind of kept open. So if someone comes in, we can usually place them there that day if necessary, and they can stay there for up to two weeks. And during that two weeks, we try to work out a longer-term solution, and if that longer-term solution includes or means living on campus, there is some grant money that they can stay in the residence hall for free.

Another example includes domestic violence. In one instance, campus and community worked together to meet a student’s housing needs:

For example, right now, we had a young woman who suffered domestic violence, so we were able to find housing for her for a semester. But once I was unable to help anymore, there’s a group on campus called

Voice. They work and have a partnership for domestic violence, and they were able to help her through.

Both instances of providing campus housing involved multiple parties and limited the amount of help offered to the students regardless of the situation. Campus and community coordination to provide for students was a constant theme. One interviewee indicated, "The other big agency that I work with is HUD, and they said that they have 10 vouchers ready for any student who is homeless," and another stated:

The people that have the dorms, you know we are renting those, and we have a new dorm, and about anything that is close to mid-semester or after 3 or 4 weeks before the end of school, I'll say they won't charge me to put students in campus housing.

Unlike other physiological needs that can be purchased or donated, housing is not easily acquired by institutions and requires collaboration with outside organizations.

**Clothing.** Most of the clothing banks revolved around professional clothing for interviews, as one administrator highlighted. Most clothing comes from donations or through collaboration with local agencies such as Goodwill:

Goodwill will swap out the clothes. They can go to the Salvation Army

and pick out like three shirts and three pairs of pants, and you can get it for free if they want to check off the boxes that they need. But I wanna say Goodwill they were swapping out clothes from our clothing closet.

The size of the closets varied from being "minimal" to having over 800 suits for students. With the basic needs met, institutions can also provide some moderate support for the next level of needs.

### **Safety**

According to Maslow (1943), safety refers to various types of security, and in this instance, the most common theme for safety was financial security. This included financial aid, supplies such as books, fee payments, and short-term financial loans. Interviewees described the ways students' finances ebbed and flowed throughout the semester. While many students utilized loans to meet their tuition and basic needs of housing, food, and clothing, unforeseen and necessary costs associated with a college education (i.e., textbooks, lab supplies, organization fees) increased financial insecurity for this group of students. As a result of student experiences, institutions created programs with the underlying philosophy of "we don't want a financial reason to be the reason [a student] leave[s]." Schools established emergency funds in such a way that were separate from state

funds. This allowed institutions greater flexibility to provide for students in whichever way they may need. Some institutions utilized grants for critical yet small needs "...for medication or something like that. And we would just do a grant up to maybe \$200 or \$300." Some institutions recoup the funds while others utilize them as grants:

Depending on the situation and if the student, if there's any ability to recoup those funds and we think, cause sometimes people just need to buy a little more time until something comes in. So that's part of the assessment. So we will often disburse a little larger amounts in that case and know that it's going to be paid back.

Regardless of whether the money is a grant or loan, institutions have found ways to help meet students' financial security need.

### **Belongingness**

The third level of need is a sense of belonging. Since students benefit from a sense of belonging, this level of need is significant for CSEFC. Most professional liaisons earned those positions because of the ways they established trust and built relationships with students. One program worked to establish personal connections with the community while meeting needs:

There are [students who experienced homeless or foster care] moving in by

themselves with one car or no car. Or things of that sort, so I felt that it would be nice to start an initiative and collaboration with our parent volunteers and ambassadors that live here in the local metro area to volunteer time to actually help get things out of the car and move them in. And help bring about some excitement, some joy about being a first-year student here.

This example provided a clear interest in establishing a personal relationship with the students and connecting them to the institution and parent board. To help with the initial sense of belonging, many other institutions created move-in kits that included "the essentials, the toilet paper, paper towel, maybe some bed linen, some pencils, a pack of papers, notebook papers."

It is problematic to assume that students will benefit from support, especially initially. However, sometimes administrators are notified of a student who was in foster care. In those instances, professionals have opportunities to build relationships. One dean of students said, "I learn about a student that is coming...[and] offer them the support [and] resources. [The initial meeting] would basically be about just knowing about me and what I do in general on campus."

In this example, the priority for establishing a connection and relationship is paramount for a professional to ensure the student knows of the resources on campus and has a relationship with someone they can trust. Other examples of belongingness included setting up a network of information for students from foster care who may need help. SAP takes a personal approach to make sure that CSEFC received the support they needed. One professional described the way she introduced students to her colleagues. She would say:

Hey, I'm meeting with this student, and I am sending them over to you because there are some questions and needs, and this isn't something I can or should answer. Then the student knows who they are going to, and then that person has an understanding of foster care...and I think some universities have done a better job of setting up that kind of a network.

The central theme of belongingness is establishing a long-lasting relationship that persists more than a one-time transactional exchange. One administrator stated it well by saying, "The point of contact and the network on campuses—students would be involved with them for over four years."

## **Esteem**

Through the interviews, it became evident that these programs' primary goals to support CSEFC were to provide basic needs, safety, and a sense of belonging. The intended outcome went far beyond a means to an end with retention, progression, and graduation, but rather to bolster these students' self-esteem. These programs hoped to promote and develop students to be able to advocate for themselves. One administrator proclaimed the need for "courageous conversations" that allowed students to speak about their personal experiences. Programs like courageous conversations seek to empower students further and allow them to see the ways they "have more resiliency than the average student."

It is through these means that these programs seek to not only support students academically but physically, emotionally, and financially.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

In reviewing the literature and results of this study, one key conclusion, or omission, is the difficulty of distributing resources to students who do not identify themselves. Each of these institutions expressed a word-of-mouth campaign to connect students with the resources and programs the institution had established. Each of the institutions provided programs and resources that address

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. Most of the programs and resources are committed to the first two levels: basic needs and safety. Addressing physiology and safety needs is not surprising, considering the students in greatest need may have struggled to have these needs met consistently throughout their lives (Kinarsky, 2017). Additionally, unlike their traditional second or third-generation student counterparts, CSEFC likely do not have the familial support to provide resources such as housing, finances, or even food in times of need. These students' needs were broadly the same but distinctly different. Each institution found ways to help students with food, shelter, and money. Another common thread was the relationships established between the program administrators and students. These relationships are encouraging and vital for professionals and students alike. Professionals can learn about the unique needs of students while supporting their emotional growth, and students can receive the support and resources they need to be successful. While CSEFC who matriculate to college may lack the interpersonal skills necessary to establish relationships with peers (Bederian-Gardner et.al, 2018), they can establish relationships with program administrators for support.

As previously mentioned, each of these programs provided the basic needs for students but struggled with finding or gaining

access to the students. Some administrators realized that students needing food, housing, or money refused services as they wanted to remain independent or discreet. Discretion was a priority within the programs. Institutions must find ways to provide resources to students who wish to remain de-identified. While some postsecondary institutions and systems are looking for ways to identify this population of students, either through questions on admission applications or on the FAFSA, SAP can promote equitable distribution of resources by making students aware of what the campus offers. Marketing campaigns that ask students to donate meal swipes, for example, can also direct students to ways they can request additional dining swipes and information regarding campus and community food pantries. Further, when students request access to institutional support, SAP can look for ways to meet those needs without asking for unessential personal information.

There are multiple ways postsecondary institutions can build this population's sense of belonging on campus. Students who wish to create community with peers who have had similar experiences, for example, would benefit by participating in learning communities or counseling groups specifically designed to meet the needs of CSEFC. Programs designed specifically to support CSEFC are increasingly common on college

campuses. These resource-rich programs not only help students navigate college but also advocate for pedagogical practices that support all students, especially those with a history of trauma.

This research brought student need to the forefront; however, there are limitations to consider. For example, the scope of the study is limited to six institutions in one university system. While there was diversity in institutional type, and I collected interview data until the point of saturation, the limited number of participants and location should be noted. A second limitation includes the use of self-reported data. The semi-structured interviews created space for administrators to speak openly about the resources available at their institutions and the anecdotal impact of said resources. While administrators on these campuses were able to discuss the programs they had implemented, it was not accompanied with qualitative data to show the effectiveness of institutional support. There are multiple ways to gather additional information about this population of students, and some of the results of this research indicate an area for future research. For example, many programs collaborated with community partners, and these relationships can be beneficial to everyone involved, especially CSEFC. Further research regarding systemic collaboration between students

in foster care, K-12 schools, postsecondary schools, and social services will benefit stakeholders within these systems, including SAP.

### **Conclusion**

CSEFC are a resilient and independent group that have more access to college than before. As their presence on campuses increases, so too must the resources necessary to keep them enrolled. While it can be difficult to identify students who were in foster care, it is possible and necessary to create thoughtful programs and policies with this group's needs forefront. Framing students' motivational needs via Maslow (1943) creates an opportunity to envision the steps necessary for success in college and life. CSEFC have a unique set of needs, that when not addressed, create barriers to college progression and graduation. As colleges begin to meet this group's basic physiological and safety needs, they create avenues for college persistence for a group of students who aspires to attend college and benefit significantly from earning a degree. Their sense of hope and optimism in the postsecondary education system creates an additional reason to give them the best we can offer.

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