

Democracy's College

Key Elements to Successfully Connecting Foster Care Youth to Educational Resources for Postsecondary Success

Announcer Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Nathaniel Stewart talks with Mauriell Amechi, Regina Gavin Williams, and Blayne Stone Jr. about how the transitions and pathways to postsecondary education are similar and different for Black former foster care students. The scholars also discuss key elements to successfully connect foster care youth to educational resources that help advance the postsecondary education opportunities for this student population.

Regina Gavin Williams: Hello, everyone. My name is Dr. Regina Gavin Williams, and I am an assistant professor of counselor education and program coordinator of Higher Education Administration from North Carolina Central University. I am a licensed clinical mental-health counselor and national certified counselor. And my research focus is on the college and career readiness of adolescents aging out of the foster care system. And that primary focus came from my time working as a clinician in the community with youth who needed that support as well as their mental health needs. So very happy to be here. Thanks for having me.



Host Nathaniel Stewart: Thank you so much. And next we have Mr. Stone.

Blayne Stone Jr.: How's it going, everyone? I'm Blayne Stone Jr. I'm a doctoral student. I'm in the Educational Leadership Policy and Analysis Program, or ELPA, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. There I serve as a research associate in the Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory, or WEI Lab. Thanks for having me on this podcast. And again, my research also examines the transitional experiences of Black youth who've formally been in the foster care system towards postsecondary education.



Host Nathaniel Stewart: Thanks, sir. Lastly, we have Dr. Amechi.

Democracy's College

Mauriell Amechi:

Hello. Thank you so much for this invitation. My name is Mauriell Amechi, and I'm a visiting professor at Old Dominion University and the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership, where I reside over our higher education program. My research focuses on understanding higher education policy and research, emphasizing access and educational equity, diversity, and social justice and college readiness and student persistence for our historical marginalized and underrepresented groups. My early research particularly focuses on documenting the experiences and trajectories of youth and young adults aging out of foster care and the endless roadblocks they often face to obtain a postsecondary education and higher education. And so I'm excited to have this conversation with my fellow colleagues today about how we can better support foster youth in higher education during this pandemic that we're all enduring.



Host Nathaniel Stewart:

Thank you guys for being with me today. So, if it's okay, I just want to go ahead and jump right into the topic of conversation for today and start with the questions. First question being, you all have recently published an article, "Transitions and Pathways: HBCU College Choice Among Black Students With Foster Care Experience." Can you share how the transitions and pathways to postsecondary education are similar and different for black foster alumni?

Mauriell Amechi:

So, the title of the paper that Blayne and I published in a journal, *The First-year Experience and Students in Transition*—it's titled "Transitions and Pathways: HBCU College Choice Among Black Students With Foster Care Experience"—really focuses on understanding how do we translate the educational aspirations of foster youth into college enrollment? We know that young people in foster care typically have high educational aspirations and expect to earn a college degree.

However, we often know that they face roadblocks in terms of achieving their educational goals, and they often have pathways that are often convoluted and uncertain given the instability that they experienced transitioning out of foster care into young adulthood and independence. And so each year about 20,000 older youth in foster care age out and begin to transition to adulthood. And what we've recently learned in a policy report by another colleague is that Black college students were twice as likely to enroll in college as their same-race, non-foster care peers.

However, we know very little about their experiences and the trajectories of Black students as a *subgroup* of foster youth. And so it is really important that we unpack the intersectionality that exists among foster youth in order to better provide resources and support in terms of their needs and supporting their goals and aspirations. And so my colleagues and I, we are particularly interested in unpacking the college choice process for Black students who

Democracy's College

choose to enroll at an HBCU. I'll allow Blayne to say a little bit more about our work.

Blayne Stone Jr.:

Yeah, that's a good question. The only change, I guess, I would make is not to refer to them as "alum" because there's literature that talks about these individuals with lived foster care experience don't *graduate* from the foster care system; they're emancipated, they age out, those different types of things. So I think the interesting part about our work, again, like Dr. Amechi was saying, was looking at the thought process that these individuals had about choosing a specific HBCU. And there were some similarities, there were some differences, but across, you know, like all research, their experiences or Black youth from foster care don't have monolithic experiences.

So, there were some similarities but there were also a lot of differences and things that we witnessed as we dived into these interviews and these different types of things. I say the similarities that we saw a lot was that there was a high aspiration to go to college and to put themselves in better situations for future career aspects, putting themselves in better situations as they become adults and transitioning, getting to know some of their biological family. Some of them did know them or have relationships and some didn't. So that was an interesting dynamic that we looked at as well as how they navigated through their systems.

Then a point that I would like to make is that for a lot of them, it wasn't particularly just one institution. We did find a lot of them had opportunities to go to *multiple* institutions but chose the HBCU because of various factors that we'll get into a little bit later. But it was interesting to see that there's a lot of research that talks about not understanding and knowing the pathways of these individuals, but a lot of individuals on our study had been accepted from multiple institutions.

And I think the differences in that aspect was how they came to choose an institution and how they pursued it. You know, there were some with athletic scholarships, some with academic scholarships, some who started off in culinary institutions and then transitioned into an HBCU to these other different resources and things that they learned about along the way.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: Dr. Williams?

Regina Gavin Williams: Sure. Well, I am not on this particular research project with the two gentlemen on the call, but I would say from a global perspective, when you talk about identity, I can speak to that. When you think about youth who have intersectional identities as being Black and in the foster care system and being a college student, I could imagine that sense of belonging and culture and identity would be important.

And, you know, working at a historically black college university currently, there's a lot of fostering culture and identity in that environment. And so I can

Democracy's College

see how adolescents or young adults who identify as Black or African-American can feel a sense of belonging and feel a sense of connection to culture that fosters their sense of belonging and also academic kind of achievement. And so when we think about contextual factors, I would just think that when you think about culture and identity, when you see a reflection of yourself, especially when you're speaking to your multiple identities, you know, and seeing other individuals who may have the same types of intersectional identities, seeing other Black youth aging out of foster care, achieving postsecondary education, there's this kind of sense of 'I can achieve that as well.'

And so I think that may be a part of this if I could think about it from a wider lens, and also just helping to eradicate or reduce the stigma in the labeling that's put on youth who identify as Black or foster youth, that as a college student in being able to achieve such a success as postsecondary education and seeing other people in that environment foster that within them. So I think those are a few things to just keep in mind as a college student, period. But when you think about identity and culture being fostered in the HBCU environment, I can see how that could be a definite plus for Black students, especially Black students who identify as foster youth.

Mauriell Amechi:

Yes. And that's a great point you made, Dr. Williams. One of the findings of our paper was that our participants were attracted by not just the notion of going to an HBCU and being surrounded by the same-race peers, but more so the availability of specific resources that the university had to offer. And one of the models for success, I would say, that are emerging, we often talk about best practices, but I would call it more models of success for supporting these students as the creation of foster care, specific support mechanisms, support programs.

So this particular institution where we found our participant students, several students noted how they were informed about this foster care support program through their social worker or through their foster parents and encouraged to, you know, go on a campus tour to learn more about it or encouraged specifically to contact a staff member that ran the program, and that staff member became, essentially, an other mother to the students. As we talk about amongst Black students having these motherly figures who are within the college campus environment and are able to really nurture and cultivate the needs of Black students in higher education.

And so, this foster care support program tailored to the needs of foster care was very instrumental and encouraging these students to see college as a potential pathway for them. And to know that they would be derailed in their goals if they experienced any roadblocks, which we know are inevitable for *any* college student, but especially for students who are aging out of foster care. And so having this program in place was another level of security that these students felt and decided to go to this particular institution.

Democracy's College

Host Nathaniel Stewart: Thank you guys for that. So the next question that I had for you, what are the challenges to tangible postsecondary educational pathways for former foster youth that reflect inconsistencies in supports and policy measures?

Regina Gavin Williams: Sure. I'll talk about it from the counseling lens since that's my formal training. What I've seen, and this dates back to, I wrote my dissertation related to career and college readiness of adolescents aging out of foster care. And when I started that research, I recognized in the counseling literature, for that particular topic, it was widely absent. I had to find a lot of the literature through social work and other means to inform the practice. And I thought how much of a gap that was in understanding that counselors need to know this.

We need to know how to support adolescents, young adults, children in foster care from all levels. And what I saw from there that there's been more research in the counseling field related to the secondary experience, and even that high school to postsecondary education transition now, but we still need to see more research and literature in the counseling field focused on the postsecondary educational experience for foster youth who are transitioning out of care and specifically the support networks in place to help to ensure their successes.

So who in their, what I like to call key players, are in their support networks to support their needs, including the counselor. How can the counselor in the postsecondary educational setting be informed by understanding how support networks can help foster youth in the postsecondary educational environment, but also through their pathways. So to me, in counseling, that still reflects an inconsistency on top of needing to be more informed by policy and measures.

One of the things when I defended my dissertation that one of my committee members asked me to add, or I think it was the proposal was, you need to add a section about policy. We don't know anything about how your work is being informed by policy that could either positively or negatively impact the experimental design that you have, the interventions you have.

And so, I think from a counseling perspective, we could be more informed by policy measures that impact postsecondary educational pathways for foster youth. And so those are two things that, you know, really stick out to me that we have to continue to, as scholars and practitioners, support and continue to produce literature related to that to inform the field.

Blayne Stone Jr.: I would say the same. I think I came to this work finding that there wasn't a lot at the time, looking at the experiences of foster care youth transitioning into postsecondary education and a higher education lens. And I think that's how I really got involved in it, along with my experiences, which I worked in several group homes, several psychiatric hospitals and a lot of it where I deal with individuals who've been in the foster care system.

Democracy's College

And a lot of the times for me, my conversation with a lot of them was, like, they didn't know that college existed. They didn't know these different things were available. And I think a lot of it was built off awareness, not only on the youth, but also the people that work in these places, social workers who are often overloaded. And now that I'm in the higher education context, talking to a lot of faculty and administrators, a lot of them aren't aware of these things as well.

So, I think that goes into play with how these policies and measures can be created. I think the big process is about awareness and letting people know that this student population is out there, and it is different across states as well. So I think that's another big factor that we need to look at. Every state is different in terms of how they get funding, how these students are treated within these different contexts of group homes, in the context of hospitals and foster care adoptions and all those different types of things. And I think that all plays into how they can have access and how they can remain at colleges and universities within the country.

Mauriell Amechi:

Mr. Stone, that was a great point. And one thing that I would like to add in addition to that is really how some of these young people encounter very low expectations from some of their foster parents, some of their social workers, and in some cases school staff who have stereotypes about foster youth. And so I think that plays into what we see on a national level in terms of foster youth delaying college enrollment because they don't see it as a viable pathway. They haven't been encouraged. Many of these youth, as we know, are first-generation college students and come from low-income backgrounds.

And so, for them to see college as a viable pathway, they need these significant adults in their lives to believe in them, to encourage them, and to guide them along the way. And when those mechanisms are absent, there is no way for these young people to achieve their college goals. Even if they have aspirations to pursue college, it just becomes secondary to their immediate, basic needs, which is having some type of employment once they age out, having some type of housing security once they age out, if their foster parents no longer plan to support them.

And so, I kind of enter this work as someone who experienced foster care firsthand. I was adopted along with several of my siblings, and unfortunately I lost my grandmother my senior year of high school. And so transitioning to college was disruptive for me in a lot of ways. It wasn't a smooth process. It wasn't emotionally easy for me, but I knew that I had an opportunity to create a future for myself by pursuing a higher education. And I think it's so important that we have—just as I had, I should say—I think it's important that young people in foster care have, parents have, social workers have teachers and other staff members who believe in them and encourage them along the way.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: What are the key elements to successfully connecting foster care youth to these educational resources, assistance, and services available for advancing postsecondary educational opportunities for foster youth?

Democracy's College

Regina Gavin Williams: I would say for me, as a counselor and someone who has worked as a higher ed administrator as well, one of the things that stand out to me is the concept of wraparound services. And this is something that's kind of heavily documented in the clinical field, counseling field, which is really it's described as community-based care. And it's consisting of individualized services that are designed to maintain a child within a community setting. And so part of that is advocating for services that support stabilization within the home and the school and the community environment.

So, in that sense, wraparound services, they're developed in, it's within a collaboration of a team. So on that team can consist of the foster care youth who's at the center and then the caregivers and the care managers, mental-health providers, school personnel. So let's say if we're talking about that transition period, it could be school counselors, career development coordinators, any administrators, teachers, and also community stakeholders.

So are they a part of any programs such as Upward Bound or Educational Talent Search that's helping them to achieve this kind of educational success, postsecondary educational opportunity. So it really takes a collective unit. We often refer to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, where you see all the different co-centric circles and all the environments that make up a child's life world. Using those wraparound services to really combine resources and assets of all of these individuals coming together to really add in a piece of that ecological perspective can really help to provide well-rounded, or in this case wraparound services for foster care youth.

So, I think that model can then be translated into the postsecondary educational environment and continue with other key players or supportive adults who are now being added into that as well. That would be a key element that I would consider important.

Mauriell Amechi: Well, as I mentioned earlier, I really think it's important that college stakeholders be more intentional about serving the needs of former foster youth or students with foster care experience, because I think we often assume, treat these particular students as we treat other underrepresented students on our campuses, specifically in terms of assuring low-income students receive adequate financial aid.

Okay, we've addressed the financial aid piece, but what about the housing piece? How can we ensure that these students don't have to worry about where they're going to sleep during the two-week college to break between their first semester in college and their second semester? How can we ensure that these students have employment during college to ensure that they're able to buy what they need to meet their basic needs during college?

Those are some of the things that I think colleges sometimes overlook in terms of trying to serve a wide net of students as opposed to thinking specifically about the needs of some of the emerging college student populations, such as

Democracy's College

former foster youth that have typically been overlooked in terms of student-support services. As Dr. Williams just mentioned, how can we provide those wraparound services that really address the holistic needs of students?

And I think one model for success is through creating these foster care-specific programs to serve the needs of these students. And also thinking about staff members that are specifically hired to support these students and trained to support these students based off an explicit understanding of their needs, not just a partial understanding.

And I think there is an information and knowledge gap in terms of what the needs of these students are. And so a part of their response by institutions should include training staff members to specifically support the needs of young people aging out of foster care, and that may require them also creating support programs specifically as a larger structure in serving the needs of former foster youth.

Blayne Stone Jr.:

I share the similar thoughts with Dr. Williams and Dr. Amechi. I think it needs to be a more strategic thought processes. And when it comes to how we look at recruitment, how come to look at admissions efforts and those different types of things, I think there's things that institutions could do, but there's also things the foster care system could do to kind of meet in the middle, specifically going to where these students are.

College and universities go to other places where other demographics and populations of students are. But when we look at students who live foster care experiences, we don't see that same result or that same effort put into those places. And in my experience, these individuals are bright. These individuals are super smart, very intelligent, but again, nobody's kind of meeting them halfway, or meeting them at all, to let them know that these different possibilities are there.

When I worked at a particular group home in Florida, we kind of started doing these things where we would take our students or our youth to campus so they could see these different types of what campus is like. And I was able to connect them with, like, the BSU, or the black student union, on campus. We would go to the DNI step shows, we would go to sporting events. We would go to the different things on campus, where they were able to see and engage and meet with college students, primarily Black and Latinx students that look like them and kind of say, like, "Hey, you can do these things in college. You can study any degree, you can join a club, you can join an organization. You could be a president of an organization at universities."

So again, with a lot of them that sparked a lot of an excitement and a lot of, again, just increased their aspirations to go to college and be able to do the things that they want to do.

Democracy's College

Regina Gavin Williams: You brought up a really good point, Blayne, in the sense of exposure. And I thought about when you said that about just peer mentorship and how important that is to connect with someone who shares that collective experience, the idea of collectivism right in the Black community, for example, is *huge*. So we've been thinking about once there is some level of success for youth who is in college, for example, asking them to serve as a peer mentor for someone coming in to provide a level of support and guidance of, "Here's the resources. This is what I've done. This is how I've made it. This is how I've kind of navigated the system. I understand what you're going through." And what better person to kind of share that than a peer.

Because a lot of the times, as counselors, I've heard, 'I don't want anything to do with the system after I graduate high school. I'm done with the guardian lives, I'm done with the social workers. It's too much, y'all are in my face *all* the time. So what about having someone who shares that collective experience to say, "Hey, I understand how you feel and I'm going to support you through this." And so some of those models, I think, going along with Dr. Amechi said about the program, should maybe include that component as a level of support, too.

Mauriell Amechi: Yeah. And as part of increasing exposure, I think it's also just making sure that these young people are aware of all of the resources at their disposal. We recently saw the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act signed into law, which provides supplemental funding for the Chafee program. And the Chafee program has been an instrumental piece of legislation in serving the needs of foster youth aging out, in terms of supporting their college and career pathways. However, one of the challenges with that particular program is that we haven't seen funding increase as the cost of higher education has increased.

And so I was really happy to see this piece of legislation signed into law because one of the benefits is that it increases the educational training voucher from \$5,000 to \$12,000, which is instrumental when we think about some of the unique challenges that college students are experiencing during this pandemic, in terms of not having access to housing, their campuses transitioning to remote instruction. And we see that happening—a new college each day saying that they're no longer returning to in-person instruction. And so what does that mean for students that are housing insecure or unstable?

And so, having additional financial resources to support the education is going to be really instrumental to ultimately helping them persist to completion in the long term.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: Are there any institutional types that appear to support and promote former foster youth students' college success, especially for students of color?

Blayne Stone Jr.: Yeah. Like we mentioned on our article, there is one particular HBCU that is doing that work. And I think they do an exceptional job at getting the information out there, retaining the students, and making sure the students get

Democracy's College

the services that they need. But they're also PWIs, community colleges, those as well that have a lot of support programs for foster care youth or former foster care youth. I think it differs, obviously, in terms of recruitment and admission policies and those different types of things, but there are institutions out there, across all institution types, that are doing the work. There's not enough, I would say that for sure. But there is a small amount that are doing the work and paying close attention to this demographic student population, particularly those who have lived experiences in the foster care system.

Regina Gavin Williams: Yeah. I can think of one in particular that I find very intriguing slash I've heard that they're very supportive just by having some of the youth I work with matriculate through the program is Wake Tech's Fostering Bright Futures Program, which is a student-success program that addresses just this overwhelming need for comprehensive support to assist foster youth and making their transition out of care into independence and adulthood.

So they have a lot of different resources available and it also shares, like, some scholarship info and just partnerships that they have. But I've heard some really good things about that program through the youth that I've worked with, who found it very supportive in matriculating through their experience in community college and obtaining whatever kind of education support that were working on, whether it was a certificate or associate degree.

But I think more programs like that should definitely exist across North Carolina. I also know Charlotte has a program as well, but again, I think there needs to be more North Carolina-specific programs in the college and university environment that really speak to this. On a wide range, I do know a lot of colleges and universities have Trio programs that are very helpful for youth who may identify as foster youth, but as far as specifically for foster youth, there's only a few that I could particularly name and speak to in North Carolina specifically.

Mauriell Amechi: And in one particular foster care support program that I think has been instrumental in supporting foster youth in the state of California is the NextUp program. It's a system, or NextUp CAFYES, I think it's pronounced CAFYES program, which stands for Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support. And it's available at 45 community college campuses across the state of California. And during my short time in California, I met with a staff member at CSU Monterey Bay and got a chance to speak on their campus and meet some of their students. And I felt that that particular program motto was effective in serving the needs of foster youth by providing that single point of contact that, remember, that students could go to with concerns or needs.

It provided the students with a sense of community in terms of having monthly academic-year programs that students could attend and build community and also just opportunities for students to learn and grow along the way. And so I would particularly be interested in seeing more statewide systems adopt foster care programs that are modeled after the NextUp CAFYES programs in the state

Democracy's College

of California because I think that those models have to have broader outreach to this particular population.

Of course, we know that California has the largest demographic of foster youth in the nation. So that's part of the reason why they may have implemented a dynamic system, but I still think in certain states, for example, in the state of Illinois, which is where I'm from, I would have appreciated seeing this type of system in place to have a broader outreach and impact on these particular students.

Regina Gavin Williams: I can also speak to a project that I'm on regarding looking at support for youth in foster care in colleges and universities, postsecondary institutions in Texas. And it seems like they have a lot of various support as well. Ones that I find very intriguing and, as Dr. Amechi was saying, could be a model for a lot of other states to utilize, like, even having liaisons, you know, the idea of having a liaison that's going to support you on a college campus and transitioning and providing access to resources or whichever the campus provides.

And so, having this kind of statewide support related to financial or identity or just career development, I think it's so cool to have a state that has a lot of institutions that really stand by the idea of providing that transitional support and support to maintain, retain students in their environment who identify as foster youth. I think that we can definitely learn something from that.

So that particular project is still ongoing, but I think that we can learn a lot from being able to adapt those models in some type of way to provide more support nationally.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: As the 2018 Perkins Five legislation incorporated foster youth as a special population, career technical education, CTE, programs differ with regard to being driven by employer and student needs. So what are some promising college and career readiness initiatives that can readily move diverse foster youth in and through CTE further education and gainful employment?

Regina Gavin Williams: Well, I definitely have to put a plug for one of my, I consider her my mentee, who just came out with a resource. I wanted to share it. It's called *The Black Foster Youth Handbook*. It is by Angela Quijada-Banks. And even though she may say that, you know, it's named *The Black Foster Youth Handbook*, a lot of the resources out of this book could be shared and utilized for *all* foster youth. But the book itself provides some personal antidotes from her because she is an adult now who has transitioned out of the foster care system and has achieved a lot of success.

So, it has some personal antidotes based off of her life, but also it has a lot of tangible exercises and activities that supportive adults can do with youth who are in foster care or aging out or transitioning into adult success.

Democracy's College

So, it can be done in connection with that supportive adult or individually. But what I found is that it's super pragmatic. It takes the guesswork out of what do I need when it comes to thinking about community or thinking about career development or understanding trauma, or even thinking about the connection I may need. Or if you're someone who's starting out and thinking about all the terminology or policies that are in place related to foster youth, she includes information here related to all of that.

She used something called the Real Success Model, which is focused on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And so she uses that to identify particular spaces where youth can understand and grow. So I want to provide her website: It's www.blackfostercareyouthhandbook.com. Excellent resource, should have been done a long time ago, check it out.

The next resource I can think of, it's one that I recently learned about at a career development conference, and I'm pretty sure other people may be familiar with it, and it's not a specific resource for foster youth, but hearing the speaker talk about it, it could be something that's useful, something called Skills USA. And it's a national nonprofit education association, and it serves middle school, high school, and college postsecondary students preparing for careers in trade, technical and skilled service, including health occupations. And they offer local, state, national opportunities for students to really learn and practice personal workplace and technical skills.

Like this professional organization has different organizations on different campuses that are run by students. So if I was a student who was interested in this subject matter, I would look for a chapter at my local institution to see if I could be a part of that to help think about career skills. The other two resources that I have, even though one of them is North Carolina-specific, I think it's a great resource across the board in thinking about career exploration and things of that nature. And it's called nccareers.org.

And this is a new career website in the state of North Carolina, but it includes options for individuals to find their career interests. So using, like, the interest finder or exploring occupations, planning, careers, et cetera. And also it includes types of work-based learning and pay-for-training. It includes jobs-search options with categories on finding a career advisor, resources and information for workers with disabilities, tips and tools on how to start a job search, where to find a job, interviewing and résumés, and also shares information about the ApprenticeshipNC program.

So, to me, that's a really good resource to one, become familiar with the career development process. If you are someone who needs help from the beginning, all the way to the end, and even finding institutions that align with your interest, because there's an institution binder on there as well. And also, I'm sure this is something that's a little bit more public knowledge, but the REACH Programs that are going on in various states.

Democracy's College

So, speaking to North Carolina, obviously they have a REACH Program that offers a state-fund scholarship for qualified applicants for up to four years of undergraduate study at NC colleges and universities. So providing that sense of support with public funds and also student support with mentors and care packages and internships. So, I would say, look to see if a REACH Program is within your state as well.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: Thank you so much for that. Mr. Stone?

Blayne Stone Jr.: I don't have any specific Wisconsin-related initiatives currently right now, but I am working with a group of individuals to come up with one. A lot of our conversation has been around for individuals who may want to go into vocational settings. So talking about apprenticeships and electrician and plumbing and cosmetology, and so the other fields, because, again, like we know everyone doesn't necessarily want to go to college. They may have other aspirations, so that is a conversation that we're having.

And what that looks like for youth who are aging out of the foster care system, what that transition to independent living looks like, what it looks like to pay a bill or to get a bank account or do these other things that necessarily aren't always taught and aren't always thought to be taught to individuals who don't know these things exist. So I am working with a group of individuals around Wisconsin to try to develop such an initiative for individuals—more to come, I'll say that.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: Dr. Amechi?

Mauriell Amechi: I would say more on a national level, foster youth have access to the Chafee program, which I mentioned earlier. And the Chafee Program has been instrumental in helping young people age 14 to 21 become self-sufficient for over two decades. The program supported several areas including college readiness and vocational education readiness. And one of the financial mechanisms provided through the Chafee Program is the education and training voucher, which, as I've mentioned earlier, historically has provided 5,000 towards postsecondary education in career technical education.

And so, I think really ensuring that young people are aware of these particular resources is important and critical to promoting successful pathways into and through CTE. I also think seeing this particular program expanded to have a broader number of foster youth eligible for these resources is going to be critical. A lot of these resources provided to foster youth are age-restrictive. And so, what happens oftentimes is that these young people age out of foster here in delay college enrollment, as I mentioned earlier, and by the time that they are ready to go back to school, these resources restrict them based on their age.

And so that becomes a barrier to them ultimately pursuing their goals. I'm really happy to see, at least through the current legislation signed into law, Supporting

Democracy's College

Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act, we have seen eligibility for ETV services extended up until the age of 27. However, I would hope to see that that policy be implemented for the program permanently. And so I think ultimately what we all will see is that young people that do choose to delay college enrollment are able to access these funds to support their career and technical education as well.

And I ultimately think that if we don't consider these limitations to the Chafee Program, we're going to have a population of potential employees that are disadvantaged because they don't feel that they have the resources, the financial resources, or they feel that they're encountering these roadblocks along the way. And the fewer roadblocks that prevent these students from pursuing their goals the better. The Chafee Program is a national, federally funded program that these youth are eligible for, but removing the age restrictions is going to be critical to ensure that they can benefit from them.

Host Nathaniel Stewart: All right, thank you guys so much for your time. I just want to thank you all individually: Dr. Williams, Dr. Amechi, Mr. Stone. These are the conversations that need to be had in order to truly enact change for this population, and I believe that this is a good start. So again, I thank you for your time.

Regina Gavin Williams: Thank you.

Blayne Stone Jr.: Thank you.

Mauriell Amechi: Thank you.

Announcer Sal Nudo: Tune in next month for OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast, when Dr. Francena Turner will talk with humanities educators at community colleges in California, Illinois, and North Carolina about the importance of the humanities within community colleges and to community college students. The group will also discuss some of the challenges that occur when introducing students to skills learned through the humanities, which contribute to student learning, mobility, and employability. Dr. Turner's guests will be Steven Moreno-Terrill, Hattie M. Presnell, Summerlin Webb, and Jacinta Yanders.

Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.