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This chapter examines how postsecondary practitioners are encouraged to work collaboratively with child welfare agencies and other community-based organizations to identify and implement culturally responsive supports for former foster youth to promote early academic achievement.

Exploring Equity in Early Postsecondary Education

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Scholars have identified a litany of barriers faced by former foster youth that affect their ability to access and complete postsecondary studies. First, in order to access postsecondary studies, they must overcome barriers that impact their ability to complete their secondary studies. Examples of the barriers faced by foster youth in secondary studies include enrollment delays, changed placements and schools, inconsistent attendance, overmedication, and untreated mental and behavioral health issues (Brenner, Southerland, Burns, Wagner, & Farmer, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011). The foster youth who complete their secondary studies face new barriers to accessing and completing their postsecondary studies. Many of the barriers faced at this stage are financial, such as joblessness, homelessness, low income, and the responsibilities and costs of parenthood (Courtney et al., 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015). In addition to overcoming financial hurdles, former foster youth frequently have to overcome disjointed experiences in their primary and secondary education, lack of knowledge on how to navigate postsecondary processes, poorly timed and insufficient financial aid, and support staff who may lack the training and resources necessary to effectively support them (Cooper, Mery, & Rassen, 2008; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Compounding these challenges, former foster youth often face these barriers without a sufficient social support network while experiencing intense pressures to be independent (Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Only a small fraction of former foster youth has access to college and subsequently complete postsecondary education. Where nationally the high school graduation rate has grown to over 90%, only about 23% of former

foster youth earn a GED or high school diploma by age 26 years of age (Barnow et al., 2013; McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016). About 17% of former foster youth enroll in postsecondary education by the age of 26, and less than 3% will have earned a bachelor's degree (Barnow et al., 2013; Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016). Barriers faced by former foster youth extend beyond those of other low-income first-generation students, as reflected in the fact that almost twice as many former foster youth drop out of their studies without a degree when compared to low-income first-generation students with no history with the foster care system (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011).

Disproportionate Populations in Child Abuse and Neglect

Children of color and children living in poverty are overrepresented in the reporting and investigation of child abuse and neglect cases (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011; Sedlak et al., 2010). Because such investigations can lead to placement in the foster care system, there is a persistent overrepresentation of children from culturally marginalized populations within the child welfare system. Specifically, children from Black, Native American, Alaska Native, and multiracial families are notably overrepresented among child abuse and neglect cases and are placed into foster care at higher rates than White children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016).

Racially, the overrepresentation of Black children in foster care is most notable. Approximately 14% of all children in the United States are Black while 24% of all children in foster care are Black (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016). By contrast, 52% of all children in the United States are White, and 43% of all children in foster care are White (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016).

Native American children are also substantially overrepresented among children in foster care. Native American children represented 0.9% of the children in the United States (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016). However, 1.6% of all children in foster care are Native American (Children Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Overall, Native American children are in child welfare at a rate of 1.6 times what is expected based on the number of Native American children in the United States (Austin, 2009). This overrepresentation of Native American children is not a new phenomenon in the United States. In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act was enacted in response to the overrepresentation of Native American children in foster care. The Indian Child Welfare Act includes the following statement outlining the issue:

An alarmingly high percentage of Indian families are broken up by the removal, often unwarranted, of their children from them by nontribal public and private agencies and that an alarmingly high percentage of such children are placed in non-Indian foster and adoptive homes and institutions (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978, §1901).

The rate of children from low socioeconomic households being in foster care is five times that of children in families who are socioeconomically middle or upper class (Sedlak et al., 2010). However, it is important to recognize the intersections between race and socioeconomic class in the overrepresentation of families of color within the foster system. The higher rates of poverty that impact populations of color, the criminalization of both men and women of color, and racialized stereotypes of parental unfitness in part contribute to the disproportionately high numbers of children of color in foster care (Cooper, 2013; Roberts, 2012; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

Some of the most pervasive stereotypes reflect persistent biases against low-income parents of color. Men of color are plagued by stereotypes criminalizing their activities, characterizing them as violent thugs associated with organized crime or drug- or gambling-related activities (Cooper, 2013; Roberts, 2012; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Despite evidence to the contrary, Black men in particular are characterized as absentee fathers who frequently wantonly abandon their partners and children (Kohn, 2013). Similarly, despite national data illustrating that White women comprise the largest number of women on welfare (Cooper, 2013; Roberts, 2014), low-income women of color are portrayed as welfare queens who are characterized as having a large number of children, with little regard for their well-being. Stereotypes of parental unfitness targeted at parents of color and low-income parents fuel biases held by individuals throughout the child welfare and judicial system. As a result, child welfare reports involving families of color are more likely to be investigated, increasing the odds that children of color will be removed from their homes and further reducing the likelihood that children of color will be placed with family members (Cooper, 2013).

Early Postsecondary Achievement of Former Foster Youth by Race

Knowing that there are discrepancies in the representation of youth by race, we sought published information about the disaggregated postsecondary outcomes of former foster youth. It is important for community colleges, who serve an important role in stewarding access to postsecondary education for underserved students, to know if the early postsecondary achievement of former foster youth differentiated based on gender, race, or ethnicity. However, we were unable to locate disaggregated findings that would provide community college educators insight into former foster youth's early postsecondary outcomes.

We were able to access data from the National Youth in Transition Database through the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at Cornell University (Children's Bureau, 2017). The National Youth in Transition Database data were collected through three waves of surveys of former foster youth. The states administered the surveys when the youth were 17, 19, and 21 years of age. Specifically, we examined the sample collected in 2015 of 7,470 former foster youth who voluntarily completed the survey at age 21. Among this sample for former foster youth, 58.5% were White, 35.7% were African American, 3.8% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.6% were Asian, and 0.5% were Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Slightly over half of the sample was female, with 54% of the sample being female and 46% being male. The ethnicity was unknown for 2.0% of the former foster youth in the sample, with the sample reporting at 81.9% non-Hispanic and 16.1% Hispanic.

At age 21, only a small fraction of these youth had earned vocational certificates or associates degrees. Specifically, a total of 8.5% of the sample reported having earned a postsecondary credential, where 5.6% earned a vocational certificate or license, and 2.9% earned an associate degree or higher. Nearly a quarter of the sample, 21.7%, had earned less than a high school diploma, and 67.9% reported a high school diploma as their highest credential.

For the most part, the educational outcomes of former foster youth disaggregated by gender and by ethnicity were similar. A slightly larger percentage of male former foster youth (23.2%) than female former foster youth (20.5%) held less than a high school diploma. While the percentage of male and female former foster youth who had just a high school education (67.4% and 68.4%, respectively) and associate degrees (2.4% and 2.2%, respectively) were similar, a higher percentage of female former foster youth held vocational certificates and licenses (6.2% versus 4.8%) than males. There was a slightly higher percentage of non-Hispanics (22.3% versus 19.3%) who had less than a high school diploma. Similarly, there were slightly less non-Hispanics whose highest credential was a high school diploma (67.1% versus 71.7%). The percentages of non-Hispanics and Hispanics who held vocational certificates and licenses were 5.8% and 4.6%, respectively. Similarly, the percentages of non-Hispanics and Hispanics who had received an associate degree or higher were 2.9% and 3.2%, respectively.

The most notable disparities appeared when we compared subgroups of former foster youth disaggregated on race. The majority of each race, between 66.8% and 77.5% depending on race, reported a high school diploma as the highest degree earned. The percentage of Asian students and African American students with vocational certificates and licenses were higher than other racial groups at 7.5% and 6.5%, respectively, as compared to American Indian or Alaskan Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or White former foster youth who held vocational certificates or licenses at rates of 4.3%, 5.0%, and 5.4%, respectively. While the sample of Asian former foster

youth was small, 7.5% of them reported having earned an associate degree or higher. This is a notable contrast to the remaining races, where 3.1% of White, 2.5% of American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 2.4% of African American reported having earned an associate degree or higher. Among the 40 Hawaiian or Pacific Islander former foster youth, none had received an associate degree or higher.

Culturally Responsive Supports for Former Foster Youth

Community colleges are frequently recognized for their role in stewarding access to postsecondary education for underserved student subgroups. The American Association of Community Colleges (2015) describes community colleges as “centers of educational opportunity” that are “inclusive institutions that welcome all who desire to learn, regardless of wealth, heritage, or previous academic experience” (About Community Colleges, para. 1). Implicit in these statements is the long-standing ideology that community colleges have a critical role in expanding access and educational opportunities to citizens toward a more equitable society (Dowd, 2003). However, little is known about the academic engagement and achievement of former foster youth attending community colleges, and what information exists is not disaggregated. As a result, virtually nothing is known about the postsecondary outcomes of subgroups of former foster youth attending community colleges.

Existing literature on former foster youth considers issues of emancipation, educational access, financial aid, and the experiences of those enrolled in postsecondary education, particularly using qualitative research approaches (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Davis, 2006; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Wolanin, 2005). Most of this literature does not focus exclusively on community college attendance, completion of postsecondary credentials, or emphasize equitable student outcomes for former foster youth by gender, race, and ethnicity. Although increasing attention has been paid to former foster youth, greater attention is still needed on their postsecondary pathways, college completion, further education, and labor market outcomes.

Research is needed that examines intersecting identities of former foster youth and the differentiated educational impacts of the policies, resources, and support services provided to former foster youth. Specifically, research is needed to identify support structures that broaden former foster youth completion and aid in transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. Schlossberg’s transition theory may have heuristic value in unpacking the nuances of transitioning from state foster care to navigating college study (Schlossberg, Waters, & Sponsler, 1995). Schlossberg’s transition theory provides a framework for examining systems of adult transition (for example, how students move into, move through, and move out of college). In particular, Schlossberg’s theory of transition provides a framework that

can aid in understanding the needs and strategies of former foster youth as a unique postsecondary student population. This is especially the case when considering students transition into and through colleges by institutional type as well as other personal and contextual factors. More specifically, the process of transitioning to postsecondary education for former foster youth attending community college students can be informed by transition theory as the extent to which students persist or the event of student departure is influenced by what is referred to as the 4Ss—situations, self, social support, and strategies (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Schlossberg et al. contend that these four factors impact how students transition from one situation/context to the next, the degree to which unanticipated events and fluctuating circumstances can readily occur, and their coping ability during transitions.

Community college faculty and administrators are encouraged to examine and track the enrollment and outcomes of former foster youth disaggregated by gender, race, and ethnicity at their institution. The demographics of the former foster youth served and their outcomes will vary across institutions. This information is critical to building and adapting practices to be responsive to the needs of the former foster youth at each institution. In recognizing inequitable representation among disaggregated subgroups of foster youth, practitioners are encouraged to reflect on the cultural responsiveness of the supports and services they offer to foster youth. Specifically, practitioners are encouraged to recognize that the needs of former foster youth are not homogeneous and that building equity will require meeting the diverse needs of the former foster youth in their communities and at their institutions.

Community college staff and faculty are encouraged to focus their efforts toward building students' areas of personal strength or building support structures in order to support foster youths' resiliency in the face of adversity. Areas of personal strength include students' sense of autonomy, social competence, problem-solving abilities, sense of purpose, and achievement motivation (Benard, 1993; Morrison & Allen, 2007). Support structures consist of a network of people and resources available to former foster youth and can include academic supports; assistance with securing housing, food, financial, and other emergency needs; and personal guidance and counseling (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).

Community college educators can build networks of services to support former foster youth by partnering with local or statewide child welfare agencies. Child welfare agencies can provide institutions with an overview of the potential former foster youth they could be enrolling, the pathways these youth use into postsecondary study, fiscal and other resources available to help support former foster youth in postsecondary education, and regional and contextual barriers former foster youth experience. Working collaboratively campus partners, child welfare agencies, and other community-based organizations can assist community college practitioners

identify and implement culturally responsive supports necessary to address the barriers that impede former foster youth academic achievement and build former foster youths' resiliency both in and out of academic settings.

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