



Invited summaries of research for scholar and practitioner allies of foster alumni and other traditionally hidden college student populations

### Hidden College Student Populations

Not visibly identifiable

Often without voice

May be resistant to self-identifying

### R is for Thursday

### Network of Oklahoma

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**The Scholar-Practitioner** is a bi-monthly publication of invited research summaries that target the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner allies for former foster youth and other traditionally hidden college student populations. The first six issues pre-empt the **National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Foster Alumni and other traditionally hidden college populations**, the nation's first research conference in this interdisciplinary area of study. The conference will be hosted by OSU and held February 19-20, 2020, in Washington D.C.

*Financial support for the 2020 conference is being provided by the Spencer Foundation and the OSU Christine Cashel Professorship in Higher Education & Student Affairs. The 2020 conference leadership team is: Kerri Kearney and Lisa Will, OSU; Lori Tiller, University of Georgia; Jennifer Geiger, University of Illinois; Royel Johnson, The Pennsylvania State University; and Megan Piel, The University of Texas at San Antonio. The conference will be held in concert with, and with conference support from, the 39th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina (director Jennifer Keup).*

## Foster Care Alumni and Higher Education: Taking a Look at Texas

Watt, T., Faulkner, M., Bustillos, S., & Madden, E. (2018). Foster Care Alumni and Higher Education: A Descriptive Study of Post-secondary Achievements of Foster Youth in Texas. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 1-10.

### Research Summary

A national movement is underway to improve higher education outcomes of youth who have experienced foster care. One particular strategy, adopted by 23 states, is to offer a tuition and fee waiver for foster care alumni (FCA). While this policy is intuitively appealing, we know very little about whether tuition waivers have been effective and if so, to what extent.

In 1993, Texas became the second state (after Florida) to legislate a tuition and fee waiver for FCA. In addition, recent research (using 2014-2015 data) revealed that Texas distributes more FCA waivers than any other state (Hernandez, Day & Henson, 2017). Finally, in 2016 the Texas state legislature mandated that the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) begin to track academic outcomes of FCA to better understand the impact of the state waiver program. Thus, Texas has become an interesting case study.

### Research Questions

The study had three research questions:

1. What are the post-secondary accomplishments of foster care alumni in a state with a tuition and fee waiver?
2. What percentage of the foster care alumni who qualify for the waiver use it?
3. Does the waiver impact retention and graduation rates of the foster care alumni who use it?

**Participants and Method:**

In 2016, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) created a data set of FCA in Texas and who turned age 18 in 2009. These FCA were followed for six years (until age 24) and academic records were used to track their post-secondary accomplishments. DFPS created summary tables of these findings and shared them with our research team. While we did not have access to individual level data for an in-depth analysis, these summary statistics were a useful starting point for examining higher education outcomes of FCA in Texas.

**Findings**

The most striking finding from these data was that only 3.5% of the FCA in our study obtained a post-secondary credential by the age of 24. Approximately 1.5% received a bachelor's degree and 2.0% received an associate's degree or certificate. This is considerably lower than was hoped for, or expected. However, these data allow us to better understand why these figures might be so low.

The data reveal that a sizable percentage of FCA enrolled in higher education (32.8%). However, the vast majority saw their progress thwarted at some point along the way.

In our data set, not all FCA were waiver eligible. However, we

were able to examine a subgroup of FCA who qualified for the waiver (e.g., enrolled, emancipated youth). Of these, we found that 41% did not use the waiver. We can think of no reason why a youth, enrolled in higher education and waiver eligible, would not want to use the waiver.

In addition, we found that the waiver was associated with improved outcomes for the youth who used them. Youth who used the waiver had higher rates of retention and graduation, and the size of the effect was quite large. For example, youth who used the waiver were 68% more likely to graduate than those who did not use the waiver. Finally, we learned that even though the youth who used the waiver had higher graduation rates, their graduation rates still fell far below those of non-foster youth in Texas.

**Implications for Practice and Practitioners**

The core insights gained from this descriptive study are that a legislated tuition waiver may be able to substantively improve higher education outcomes, however, it is not a panacea.

Implications for practitioners and colleges are:

1) There is a need to inform legislators that waivers are a viable strategy for supporting FCA in higher education and thus should be adopted or retained.

2) If there is a waiver, utilization cannot be assumed. Practitioners and campuses need to identify waiver eligible youth and help them access the waiver.

3) Tuition waivers should be viewed as a necessary, but insufficient strategy for improving higher education outcomes of FCA.

There is also a need to develop campus support programs that address additional well-documented needs of FCA in areas of housing, academics, mental health, and social support.

**Conclusion**

Tuition waivers can improve higher education outcomes for FCA. However, policy makers, practitioners, and colleges should not stop there. There is a need to create comprehensive strategies for supporting these youth, attend to the execution of these policies and programs, and evaluate their effectiveness.

Link to article:

<https://link-springer-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/article/10.1007%2Fs10560-018-0569-x>

Hernandez, L., Day, A., & Henson, M. (2017). Increasing college access and retention rates of youth in foster care: An analysis of the impact of 22 state tuition waiver programs. *Journal of Policy Practice*, 16, 397-414.

*To sign up for ongoing email updates about the 2020 national conference and/or for archives of The Scholar-Practitioner, go to: [education.okstate.edu/risforthursday](http://education.okstate.edu/risforthursday).*

**SAVE the DATE**

FEB. 19-20, 2020



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**NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP ON FOSTER ALUMNI**

and other traditionally hidden college populations