

The Scholar-Practitioner

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A publication of R is for Thursday

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Invited summaries of research for scholar and practitioner advocates for, traditionally hidden college student populations

Current Hidden College Student Populations

May include those who have foster care or justice-involved experiences, who are survivors of sexual violence, who are recovering drug or alcohol addicts, who face housing insecurity, or who are considered Third Culture Kids

R is for Thursday

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National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a monthly publication of invited research summaries that target the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner advocates for college students with experiences in foster care and other hidden college student populations.

This publication reinforces the work of the **National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations (NCHP)** by providing a space to share research applications for practice. NCHP was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study. The NCHP 3rd conference will be

From Foster Care to College: Experiences of Students in Illinois

Havlicek, J., Dworsky, A., & Gitlow, E. (2021). *Using Research to Improve the Post-secondary Educational Outcomes of Community College Students in Foster Care*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/foster-youth-not-receiving-needed-supports-from-community->

Research Summary

The most common pathway into postsecondary education among young people in foster care is community college (Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Okpych et al., 2020). However, few studies have examined the experiences of community college students who are or were in foster care. Consequently, we know relatively little about why young people in foster care choose to enroll in community college, what happens to those young people once they enroll, or whether they are receiving the supports they need to achieve their educational goals.

We conducted this mixed-methods study with funding from the Spencer Foundation to address two research questions:

- In Illinois, what proportion of young people in foster care enroll in and graduate from college?
- In Illinois, what are the experiences of community college students who are or were in foster care?

The research included three main components:

- **Administrative Data Analysis:** We obtained college enrollment and graduation records from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) for all young people in Illinois who turned 17 years old while in foster care between 2012 and 2018. We linked the NSC data to Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) administrative data and analyzed the linked data.
- **Data Review:** We reviewed documents to understand the landscape of DCFS policies and programs designed to promote postsecondary educational attainment among young people in foster care in Illinois.
- **Interviews:** We interviewed 24 students between the ages of 18 and 28 who had experienced foster care and completed at least one semester of community college. We also interviewed five administrators from four

community colleges. The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were coded and analyzed.

Findings

- About 35% of the young people who turned 17 while in foster care enrolled in college, 86% of those who enrolled in college were community college students, and only 8% of those community college students graduated with a certificate or a degree.
- Community college students had struggled in high school, felt unprepared for college, and transitioned to college with little professional guidance.
- Nearly all were required to complete remedial coursework and had a limited understanding of financial aid. Engagement with the child welfare system's two postsecondary education specialists varied widely.
- Students want community colleges to provide supports that address their unique needs, but community college administrators do not know which students need those supports.

Discussion

One major takeaway from this study is that the rate at which young people in foster care in Illinois enroll in and graduate from college has changed little over the past decade, despite

significant state and federal investments in programs designed to remove financial barriers to postsecondary education. Another is that community college students who have experienced foster care are not receiving the services and supports they need to succeed in school.

Child welfare system administrators should:

- Minimize school changes and other disruptions to education and increase collaboration with public education systems to ensure that young people are prepared for college when they graduate from high school.
- Increase awareness of financial aid available through the child welfare system and eliminate barriers to accessing that aid.

Child welfare system administrators and community college administrators should work together to:

- Develop campus-based supports for students who are or were in foster care.
 - Establish Single Points of Contact for those students at community colleges throughout the state.
 - Provide training to community college personnel on how they can serve as allies to students who are or were in foster care.
- Although our study was limited to

a single state, what we learned about the experiences of community college students from Illinois who are or were in foster care may be useful to other jurisdictions that are committed to improving postsecondary educational attainment among young people in foster care.

References

Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2018). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 23(1), 28-54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118791776>

Okpych, N. J., Park, S., Sayed, S., & Courtney, M. E. (2020). The roles of campus-support programs (CSPs) and Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) on college persistence for youth with foster care histories. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104891>

NCHP Call for Proposal NOW OPEN!

- [Presenter](#) - Present original, empirical research. **April 1, 2022**, Deadline (notifications in May 2022)
- [Research Team Member](#) - Become a new multidisciplinary research team member. **April 1, 2022**, Deadline (notifications in May 2022)
- **Please note:** If you completed an RFP for Research Team Lead, you do not need to also complete the Research Team Member information
- More information go to <https://nchp.okstate.edu>

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