The Scholar-Practitioner

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

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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. The Call for Proposals is now open.

Lessons Learned from College Support Programs for Students with a History of Foster Care

Piel, M. H., Geiger, J. M., Schelbe, L. A., Day, A., & Kearney, K. S. (2019, in press). Lessons learned from college support programs for students with a history of foster care. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*.

Research Summary

As colleges increasingly recognize the complex needs of foster care alumni, a growing number of institutions have developed campus-based support programs. Despite the increase in such programs and supports aimed to improve access, retention, and graduation rates of foster care alumni, there remains considerable variation in program structure and little is known about what is effective. The current study sought to understand the strengths and challenges overcome in program development from the perspective of program staff, administrators, and faculty researchers of campus-based support programs.

Research Questions

This study aimed to address this research question:

What are the strengths and challenges overcome in program development of campus-based support programs?

Participants and Method:

Eighty-one participants responded to an anonymous online survey (30% response rate), as part of a larger study examining the scope of campus-based support programs across the United States (Geiger, Piel, Day, & Schelbe, 2018).

The survey included open-ended prompts on the strengths and lessons learned in program development. Thematic analysis was used to review and organize the open-ended responses into categories.

Two-thirds of participants were associated with programs at 4-year public institutions (n = 55; 68%), and nearly a third were at 2-year community colleges (n = 23; 28%). The majority of participants were associated with programs in existence for 2–5 years (n = 22; 27%) or 6–10 years (n = 16; 20%), although 12 participants (15%) represented programs more than 11 years old.

Findings

Participants consistently described supportive program staff who were passionate, dedicated, and consistent. Having staff expertise in both foster care and higher education milieus was seen as important.

Many programs described elements of case management, academic support, and peer mentoring, as well as having a physical space with resources. Several discussed theoretical models that were trauma-informed and strengths-based,

focusing on self-determination and empowerment.

Financial support was identified by all participants as critical. Some described supports available to all students such as laptops and textbooks included in tuition and campus housing remaining open over holidays. Others described developing foster care-specific supports such as an emergency fund to support students in situations that could compromise their ability to attend classes, maintain employment, or remain in safe and stable housing, which can impact educational success.

Participants also described overcoming systemic barriers by advocating and educating others about the impact of trauma and the importance of empowering young adults to direct their own goals. Partnerships with financial aid, admissions, and community agencies were helpful in identifying students, and university fundraisers were important in marketing the program.

Another significant lesson shared was translating knowledge of the unique needs of foster care alumni into responsive engagement. Participants discussed being patient, available, and flexible in meeting individual student needs. They also described the importance of building authentic relationships and remembering that students are resilient and capable.

Implications for Practice for Colleges

Partnerships should be developed to enhance existing university supports as well as

develop targeted supports to promote success for foster care alumni. Increasing awareness of the unique needs of these students is important and liaisons should be designated in various campus units who can serve as champions for the success of this student population.

The need and diversity in financial support was clearly communicated by participants, related to program operations as well as direct financial aid to students. Having the ability to address short-term and immediate financial crises can keep students attending classes and create needed time for solve larger issues.

Building a sense of community and support on campus is as important as the services provided. Students may have difficulty asking or accepting help based on prior experiences, but may engage with other foster care alumni and experience bidirectional benefits of mentoring.

Conclusion

The dedication and passion of professionals, coupled with strengths-based models of engagement and collaborative relationships across campuses can promote success for foster care alumni in higher education.

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.*

NOW ACCEPTING PROPOSALS

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Foster Alumni
AND OTHER TRADITIONALLY HIDDEN COLLEGE POPULATIONS

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