Fostering Success: Empowering Former Foster Youth Through Higher Education Initiatives

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges faced by former foster youth in their pursuit of higher education and strategies implemented through The Village Project (TVP). Launched in 2022 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, TVP addresses barriers such as food insecurity, housing instability, mental health challenges, and academic disparities by providing a multi-layered support system. Through initiatives like a peer-led support group, care package program, and partnerships with community organizations, the program fosters academic, social, and emotional success. The article emphasizes the transformative impact of tailored interventions and advocates for expanding such programs across educational institutions to enhance access, retention, and success for this vulnerable population.

Keywords: *former foster youth, higher education support; academic retention; social and emotional well-being; The Village Project*

Higher education is often heralded as a pathway to greater economic stability, personal growth, and social support (Runde et al., 2023; Trinh, 2023). However, for former foster youth, this journey is fraught with unique and profound challenges. Unlike their non-foster peers, former foster youth frequently contend with the lingering effects of childhood trauma, instability caused by frequent moves within the foster care system, and a lack of consistent emotional and academic support. These barriers significantly contribute to lower rates of enrollment, retention, and degree completion among this population (Avant et al., 2021; Somers et al., 2020). Addressing these challenges is critical to advancing equity in education and ensuring that former foster youth have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

With over 30 years of personal and professional experience in child welfare—particularly focused on improving outcomes for former foster youth—this researcher has witnessed firsthand the systemic and individual barriers faced by this population. This reality became a driving force behind this researcher's commitment to understanding and addressing the educational disparities experienced by former foster youth. In 2017, this researcher pursued a doctorate in higher education to explore the structural and systemic drivers of these disparities and develop strategies that promote resilience and academic success.

This research was catalyzed by an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of former foster youth during their transition to college and their first year of attendance. The study aimed to identify the specific barriers these students face in completing their degrees and to design support programming tailored to meet their unique needs. This paper presents the findings and implications of this researcher's exploration of the first-year college experiences of former foster youth, particularly those who aged out of care in Illinois. Additionally, this paper offers an overview of programming developed and implemented by this researcher at three public universities in Illinois. This program was designed to address these barriers and foster meaningful support for this population.

Preparation for College

In 2021, about 36% of Illinois foster youth had more than two foster home placements (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). These frequent moves often result in academic disruption and loss of academic credits, making it difficult for foster youth

to build a solid and stable educational foundation. Their high schools are typically under-resourced, and many foster youths follow basic education tracks rather than college preparatory tracks. This can create a snowball effect that continues, as these students must enroll in remedial classes when they enter college, which can extend their time in college and exhaust their eligibility for financial aid before degree completion (Dworsky, 2017).

By understanding the unique educational barriers faced by foster youth and developing comprehensive strategies to address them, child welfare and education system stakeholders can work together to develop an equitable approach that will lead to success in college. Such efforts are not only an investment in the future of these resilient youth but also in the broader goal of advancing social and economic equity.

Lack of Information about College Funding

While youth are in foster care, the focus of the child welfare agencies is on safety and permanency, with limited attention given to college preparation (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Funding for college has increased at the federal and state levels for former foster youth to pursue traditional and nontraditional career paths (Sarubbi et al., 2016); however, the information needs to be readily given to the youth by the institution responsible for their overall well-being. Most former foster youth need access to the necessary resources to explore postsecondary options and navigate the college application process (Dworsky, 2017). They also need more familial support to gain this information, which includes information needed to determine federal and state financial aid eligibility.

Two such programs exist in Illinois: First Star Academy[1] and Foster Progress[2]. Both are state-funded programs that prepare high school-aged foster youth for college. First Star Academy offers a multi-year college readiness program, while Foster Progress offers guidance and mentorship. Despite their effectiveness, these programs reach only a small fraction of the 20,743 children in foster care in Illinois (Children's Bureau, 2022) of which 9,848 are youth aged 15–20 (Illinois Department of Children & Family Services, 2024).

The following federal and state programs offer assistance that does not require repayment:

- **Pell Grants**: Up to about $7,500 annually.
- **IL Monetary Award Program (MAP) Funding:** Up to $8,400 annually.
- **Work-Study: S**tudents work in varied positions at the university and earn money to help pay for school. The amount is based on their financial aid eligibility.

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) also offers the following post-secondary educational assistance programs for foster youth through their Office of Education and Transition Services:

- **Youth In College Vocational Training**: This source provides a monthly board payment of $1506 for up to five consecutive years or through age 25, whichever comes first. A one-time startup amount of $231 is given to the youth for living expenses.
- **DCFS Scholarship**: This competitive scholarship provides a monthly stipend of $1506 for up to 5 consecutive years, a one-time startup payment

1 https://childwelfare.illinoisstate.edu/first-star-academy/

2 https://www.foster-progress.org/

to be used for living expenses, Illinois medical benefits, reimbursement for books that are not covered by federal financial aid grants, and a tuition and fee waiver if they are attending an Illinois state-funded community college or university.

- **Education and Training Voucher**: This voucher provides up to $5000 to cover tuition, fees, books, supplies, uniforms, equipment, and transportation not covered by other grants or scholarships. Funding is available through the age of 25 if the student continues to make satisfactory academic progress. Students can attend any accredited college or university nationwide and full-time status is not required.
- **Tuition and Fee Waiver**: Eligibility for this waiver requires the student to have aged out of DCFS guardianship at age 18 or older, or DCFS must have had legal guardianship prior to their adoption or guardianship finalization. The student must have filed a federal financial aid application.

Navigating College

The transition to college is a pivotal period that presents unique challenges for former foster youth, many of whom are also first-generation students. Tinto's (1993) seminal work underscores the importance of a student's first-year experience, which shapes their social, emotional, and academic trajectory throughout college. However, former foster youth often lack access to the resources and support necessary to navigate this transition effectively. Without guidance, they may struggle to engage with faculty, participate in campus organizations, or seek help when needed. This lack of engagement fosters feelings of disconnection from the college community, diminishing their sense of belonging, and increasing the likelihood of academic underperformance or early withdrawal.

Data highlight the severity of these challenges. While comprehensive statistics on former foster youth matriculating to four-year universities in Illinois are unavailable, a study by Havlicek et al. (2022) reported that only 8% of foster youth who enroll in community college in Illinois graduate with a degree or certificate. This is despite the fact that 35% of foster youth in the state enroll in college. On a national scale, nearly half of former foster youth drop out during their first year of college—a rate significantly higher than the 25% observed among other first-generation and low-income students (Kisiel et al., 2021; Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Mental health issues further complicate the transition to college for former foster youth. A history of trauma, common in this population, often manifests as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and emotional dysregulation. These symptoms can interfere with their ability to adjust to college life, contributing to heightened feelings of isolation, difficulty forming trusting relationships, and challenges in managing academic pressures (Morton, 2018). Additionally, many former foster youths lack consistent adult role models to guide them in developing resilience and coping strategies, leaving them underprepared for the demands of higher education (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

The stresses of transitioning into adulthood, navigating complex institutional systems, and managing finances without familial support exacerbate these mental health challenges. Eisenberg et al. (2009) found that students with untreated mental health conditions are more likely to experience academic underperformance and lower retention rates. For former foster youth, who frequently lack access to quality mental health services, these barriers are particularly acute (Wright et al., 2025). Addressing their mental health needs during this critical transition period is vital.

Trauma-informed counseling services, peer support groups, and mentorship programs are essential interventions for mitigating the emotional and psychological challenges faced by former foster youth. Research indicates that students who use counseling services tend to experience better emotional and academic outcomes (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Yet, many foster youth encounter barriers to accessing these services, including unfamiliarity with available

resources, stigma surrounding mental health, and logistical challenges such as scheduling conflicts and transportation issues.

Peer relationships also play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among college students (Juvonen et al., 2012). However, forming these relationships can be particularly difficult for former foster youth whose past experiences may make them hesitant to depend on others or participate in social activities. This reluctance often leads to further isolation, compounding the challenges they face. Programs designed to address these gaps by providing counseling, peer support groups, and opportunities for social connection can be transformative. Such initiatives not only offer emotional support but also equip former foster youth with practical guidance to navigate the complexities of college life and achieve long-term success.

Research Findings

This researcher conducted a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth during their first year attending a public state university in Illinois (Hampton-Campbell, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven students: four from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), one from Illinois State University (ISU), and three from Northern Illinois University (NIU). The participants had diverse and often challenging experiences in foster care, ranging from frequent placement changes to periods of homelessness and living independently for over a year while trying to navigate high school. Despite these adversities, the students expressed a strong desire to create a better life than what they had experienced with their biological families, a life often marked by poverty and neglect. For these students, education represents the critical tool for turning their aspirations into reality.

Participants described a wide range of challenges they faced both during their time in foster care and in their transition to college. Many reported frequent disruptions in their education due to placement changes, as well as a lack of consistent academic support. Some participants highlighted how homelessness and the absence of stable, supportive relationships during high school made it difficult to focus on their studies. While a few participants benefited from financial aid and college preparation programs, the majority lacked reliable guidance from foster parents, school counselors, or child welfare agencies.

Participants reported struggling with academic preparedness, largely due to insufficient academic support during their time in foster care. This lack of preparation created challenges in adjusting to the academic rigor of college. These findings align with themes identified in the literature, including difficulties in navigating college systems, limited access to information, and inadequate preparation for higher education.

Notably, only two participants shared that they had some knowledge of financial aid and college preparation programs, which reduced their anxiety and increased their confidence in attaining a degree. In contrast, the remaining participants reported receiving little to no support or guidance in these areas. Many had to navigate financial aid and college application processes independently, often without the resources or knowledge necessary to make informed decisions.

Hampton-Campbell (2021) underscores the need for targeted interventions to support former foster youth in their transition to and persistence in higher education. The findings highlight the importance of providing consistent academic assistance, access to reliable information about college preparation and financial aid, and mentorship to help foster youth navigate the complexities of higher education successfully.

Program Development

To address the unique challenges faced by former foster youth transitioning to higher education in Illinois, this researcher developed The Village Project (TVP), a comprehensive support program aimed at fostering academic, social, and emotional success.

TVP serves as a lifeline for these students, providing structured support networks that address both academic and personal needs. The program employs a two-pronged approach:

1. **Fostering Academic, Social, and Emotional Success (FASES):**

- ***Dine and Align*** offers students the opportunity to participate in monthly family-style dinners, providing a relaxed environment where they can connect with campus and community resource providers.
- ***Peer-Led Support Groups*** consist of monthly meetings designed to foster a sense of community and encourage mutual support among participants.

2. **Host Family Program (HFP):**

- ***We Care*** delivers care packages to students throughout the academic year to address their immediate needs and provide encouragement.
- ***Home Away from Home*** is an initiative currently in development that will recruit and train volunteers to support students during semester breaks and assist with other needs as they arise.

The Village Project recruited students through the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Educational Transition Office and officially launched during the Fall 2022 semester at UIUC. Since its inception, the program has consistently supported seven to ten participants annually from diverse academic disciplines, including one master's-level social work student who successfully graduated in Summer 2023. TVP addresses a wide range of critical needs, such as food insecurity, housing instability, mental health challenges, and academic difficulties. By providing access to essential resources and fostering strong support systems, TVP aims to dismantle barriers that often hinder foster youth from succeeding in higher education.

Impact and Community Collaboration

Since its launch, TVP has expanded its reach to Governors State University (GSU), a public, regional university that serves the south suburban area of Chicago, and Eastern Illinois University (EIU), a rural public regional university. Plans are underway to further develop the program statewide. Partnerships with organizations such as Foster Progress[3] have amplified TVP's impact, offering additional resources like mentoring programs and annual retreats that are vital for the success of foster youth in Illinois.

A distinctive strength of TVP is its emphasis on community engagement. The program collaborates not only with universities and colleges but also with community organizations, government agencies, and individuals dedicated to the well-being of foster youth. This collaborative approach ensures that students receive holistic support, encompassing academic guidance, social connections, emotional well-being, and the fulfillment of special needs.

One ongoing initiative in collaboration with a local publishing house aims to document and share the personal stories of TVP participants. These narratives serve as powerful tools to inspire other foster youth to pursue higher education, highlighting the transformative potential of programs like TVP. By sharing these stories, the program seeks to deepen understanding of the resilience of foster youth and advocate for systemic change to better support them.

Through the combined efforts of TVP, its partners, and community collaborations, the program is transforming the trajectory of former foster youth in Illinois. By equipping these students with tools, resources, and unwavering support, TVP empowers them not only to succeed academically but also to thrive personally and professionally, ensuring a brighter future beyond college.

3 Foster Progress connects college students who've experienced foster care with peer advocates through their Youth in Care Advocacy Program, providing essential support and mentorship.

Conclusion

Empowering former foster youth to succeed in higher education requires a holistic approach that recognizes and addresses their unique challenges. These young adults often face a combination of academic, social, emotional, and financial barriers that prevent them from fully participating in and benefiting from the college experience. Programs like The Village Project (TVP) have demonstrated the profound impact that tailored, multi-faceted support systems can have in addressing these challenges. TVP has already made great strides with a multi-faceted support system that includes academic guidance, emotional support, social connections, and resources to meet special needs, all of which are critical to fostering student success.

While TVP's model has shown remarkable promise, much work remains to be done. Expanding such programs to more universities, community colleges, and even high schools could create a broader, more inclusive support network, ensuring former foster youth have access to resources and encouragement throughout their educational journeys.

Expanding such resources to more universities, community colleges, and even high schools would help provide former foster youth with an inclusive and supportive environment at every stage of their educational journey. As more organizations adopt and implement models that prioritize the unique needs of foster youth, the potential for improving college enrollment, persistence, and completion rates will increase. This would help to ensure that these young people are not left behind in their aspirations for a brighter future.

About the Author



Dr. Sharva Hampton-Campbell *is an Assistant Professor at Chicago State University and holds an Ed.D. in Higher Education Interdisciplinary Leadership from Governors State University. A two-time alumna of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work, Dr. Sharva has dedicated over 30 years to enhancing the lives of foster youth. Her doctoral research notably addressed the retention impacts of college support services on former foster youth at four-year institutions. With a keen ability to identify and address service gaps for underrepresented groups, she has developed impactful programs across various settings, significantly improving outcomes for women, children, and families. Dr. Sharva also travels as a motivational speaker, enriching women's lives domestically and abroad. She is the founder and CEO of Women on the Move Network Global, a nonprofit that supports women's passions and the educational achievements of former foster youth. Dr. Sharva is also a prolific author, having co-authored four professional development books, published a two-volume anthology series, and authored several children's books, with her works available in resource libraries worldwide.*

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