AGING OUT: A TRANSITIONAL PATHWAY FROM FOSTER CARE TO COLLEGE AND BEYOND

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to plan, implement, and research a supportive transition program for a foster youth aging out of the foster care system who met the academic criteria for admission to Nova Southeastern University.
Transition

Education plays a significant role in the lives of foster care youth in transitioning successfully into adulthood. The paucity of positive and supportive relationships, when “aging out” of the foster care system, as well as an uncertain and stressful independent living situation, may correlate with academic failure.
Risk Factors

Risk factors associated with academic failure for foster care youth include:

- Homelessness
- Mobility
- Criminal justice involvement
- Limited transportation
- Substance abuse
- Teenage prostitution
- Mental health issues
- Maltreatment
- Community challenges
Project

- This pilot program was launched by the Fischler School of Education and Services (FSEHS) to provide an academic portal for transitioning foster youth into postsecondary education with a continuing career pathway.
Project (cont.)

- FSEHS partnered with collaborating community-based organizations to help provide the support network needed to sustain foster youth in the academic setting.
Selection Process

This project focused on one foster care youth who was interested in attending college. The youth was identified by the United Way and ChildNet of Broward County, the two community-based organizations collaborating with FSEHS in this project to participate in the supportive transition program.
Research Objectives

- To develop a theoretical conceptualization of the experience of foster youth in the transition from secondary to post-secondary education
- Initiate the process of enhancing and validating a supportive transition model to be implemented with foster youth participant
Challenges and Barriers

There are many challenges and barriers documented within the literature encountered by youth aging out of the foster care system:

(a) substance abuse
(b) learning disabilities
(c) funding
(d) housing and transportation
(e) poor support system
(f) student engagement
(g) strong religious and political ideology
The Resolution

(a) Access to a better support network;
(b) Computer training;
(c) Counseling;
(d) Tutoring, mentoring, and job coaching;
(e) Supplemental funding;
(f) Housing and transportation; and
(g) Student engagement.
Methodology

Case study approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods
Administered three assessment instruments over the academic year
Obtain in-depth data about the program’s effects and the experiences of the individual
Methodology (cont.)

By assessing the student during the school year, the researchers were able to ascertain the student’s level of progress and provide feedback to the program staff.
Instruments

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) - assess the transition and adjustment to the college environment as well as university attachment

Self-Description Questionnaire-III (SDQIII) - self-concept (academic and global)

Social Support Behaviors (SS-B) Scale - available social support

Course Grades - academic performance
Interviews

Semi-structured format, utilizing open-ended questions

In relation to research questions interviews were used to ascertain:

(a) a psychosocial conceptual model for the transition of young adults from foster care to college

(b) the effectiveness of the supportive program

(c) the elements of the supportive program that are the “active ingredients” in assisting the participant
Conceptual Model of Transition to College

- Psychosocial factors
  - Trauma - death of parents
  - PTSD symptomatology
  - History of anorexia and depression
  - Parentification
  - Avoidance coping style
  - Strong religious & political ideology

- SDQ-III results demonstrated low emotional stability which decreased over the year
Conceptual Model of Transition to College (cont.)

- Educational
  - Disruption due to frequent moves
  - Defensiveness - use of denial
  - Poor coping with academic stress
  - Under-utilization of available resources
  - Underdeveloped time management skills; procrastination
  - Problems concentrating during tests
  - Poor math self-concept on SDQ-III but high verbal and general academic self-concept
Conceptual Model of Transition to College (cont.)

- Social Support
  - Very limited
  - Lack of opportunities to bond with other students
  - Residing off campus
  - Uncomfortable about history in foster care
  - Reported relatively high levels of support on SS-B
Findings

- Selection process needs to be refined
- Bi-weekly tutoring /counseling sessions if necessary
- Availability of services does not ensure success.
- It takes time to develop an adult trust relationship with this group.
- Procrastination issues
- Avoidance coping as survival skill
- Time management issues
- Attending multiple schools while in foster care significantly increases gaps in the participant’s education (remediation required)
Findings

- Lack of engagement to the University
  - Inappropriateness of school of education for her expressed interests
  - Dislike of NSU
  - Need for career counseling and academic advising
  - Consistent with overall adjustment on the SACQ which decreased
- Receptive to assistance
  - Counseling services
  - Engagement in treatment
  - Referral to trauma specialty program
Effectiveness and Recommendations

- Dropout
- Identification of psychological needs
  - Initial psychoeducational evaluation to tailor intervention
- Engagement in intervention
  - Not adequate
  - Felt that time-management skills were helpful
- Need to work collaboratively and multi-systemically
- Limited follow-up regarding academic failure by program
FSEHS Summer Conference 2008 – Workshop – Conducting Qualitative Research (doctoral students)

2008, February - Fostering Success. Policy Forum Panel
Discussion on Foster Care and Homelessness. Florida Children First Organization.
Collaboration

All work was completed at NSU in partnership with the Health Professions Division, ChildNet, and the United Way of Broward County. All work in a multifaceted academic and career program.
Collaboration (cont.)

- Senetta Carter (NSU doctoral student with FSEHS), with her expertise in foster care transitioning, served as a consultant in this program. The grant was administered through the Grants and Contracts Office on the Davie Campus at NSU.
# Lessons Learned

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Future Goals

- Further development of an online academic transitional “toolbox” for aging-out foster youth
- Further development of a university-wide transitional support system to advise and continually mentor aging-out foster youth
- Further development of an aging-out foster youth post-secondary transitional center