

Stability and Success: The Role of Financial Aid and Assets in Postsecondary Education and Training Persistence of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

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Postsecondary education and training outcomes for youth in foster care lag behind those of the general population. This dissertation focused primarily on whether state differences in tuition waivers for youth aging out of foster care, federal Education and Training Voucher (ETV) allocations, Title IV-E eligibility (age-out policy), other potentially stabilizing assets, foster care history, and other aspects of personal experience and characteristics correlate with differences in postsecondary persistence outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. Theories on college student persistence, assets and capabilities, and ecological development guided design of the study, and data from the National Student Clearinghouse, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Conference of State Legislatures, and Foster Care to Success for 10 states over 10 years were used to respond to the research questions.

Findings that aligned with previous research suggest that three types of stability aid postsecondary persistence for young people in foster care. The first of these was stability in value of the ETV over time relative to tuition. Rapid loss in value over time decreased likelihood of persistence. Greater stability created by minimizing the number of foster care placements as well as by possession of assets in the form of reliable housing, transportation, and employment also made persistence more likely.

The study also yielded findings that ran counter to those of previous studies. Although regression analyses in this study showed that students in states where the age-out limit was 21 were less likely to persist than those with age-out limits of 18, actual graduation data show that those with an age-out limit of 21 graduated at a higher rate than their peers. Regression analyses also showed those in states offering a tuition waiver for young people in foster care less likely to persist than those in states not offering waivers. Finally, although African-American and Latino youth are often shown to persist at lower rates than their Caucasian peers, this study showed the former groups more likely to persist than the latter. Follow-up research in these areas would help policymakers to better understand student strengths, and the full scope of supports needed to bridge the gaps in postsecondary persistence between young people in foster care and their peers.

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