



Better Futures: Helping Young People in Foster Care with Mental Health Challenges Prepare for and Participate in Higher Education

Many youth in foster care experience mental health issues, often associated with trauma, separation from bio family, placement changes, and other stressors. Although the overwhelming majority of youth in foster care (70%) want to go to college or vocational school,¹ very few get the opportunity; only 20% of youth in foster care who complete high school go on to attend college, as opposed to 60% in the general population.² The statistics are similarly disappointing for young people with mental health conditions. For example, a follow-along study of youth with mental health issues in high school found that over 80% expected to participate in higher education.³ However, four years after high school, only 34% had actually participated.⁴

Young people in foster care with mental health issues may be more likely to struggle in school because they do not receive the support they need to be successful and navigate barriers. Foremost, most youth in foster care lack a consistent adult to encourage them in school or to advocate for them. Low expectations of school staff, child welfare, mental health, and other professionals further limit the opportunities available for these youth to learn about and prepare for higher education. Many youth with mental health issues in foster care retain their dreams of going to college, but do not receive support or services that could promote their success.

THE BETTER FUTURES PROJECT

The goal of the Better Futures Project is to empower and support young people in foster care with serious mental health issues to prepare for and participate in college or vocational school. To accomplish this goal, Better Futures

is conducting a preliminary study of the effects of an intervention model that is informed by research on the benefits of self-determination enhancement^{5,6} and supported education.^{7,8} A centerpiece of the model is support provided to youth by near-peers who are in college themselves and who have shared experiences around foster care and/or mental health. Project youth participate in: 1) a four-day, three-night Summer Institute during which they live on a university campus; 2) individualized coaching provided about twice a month for nine months by near-peers who support youth in working toward their goals and managing barriers; and 3) mentoring workshops that bring together the youth and their coaches for discussions and experiences that are guided by speakers who have expertise around foster care, mental health and higher education.

BETTER FUTURES PARTICIPANTS

Better Futures is currently working with the last group of youth enrolled in the current study. Youth eligible to participate in the Better Futures Project were (a) in the guardianship of the state foster care system; (b) living within the project's geographic area; (c) in high school or a GED program and one or two years away from completion of their secondary education; and (d) identified as experiencing a significant mental health condition. In addition, youth had to be open to the idea of attending college (i.e. they had not ruled it out), but had not yet applied. Approximately 87% of youth invited to enroll in the project decided to join; as legal guardian, the state foster care agency provided consent for youth choosing to participate.

Sixty-seven youth were enrolled in the study. Following consent, each youth completed an assessment packet

and then was randomized into the intervention group (36 youth) or the control group (31 youth). The assessment packet gathered information around youth demographics, empowerment, self-determination, quality of life, mental health, hope, confidence about planning for college, and involvement in planning for transition to adulthood. Following their initial assessment, youth completed assessments three more times: following the Summer Institute (approximately one month after their first assessment); after their coaching ended (nine months after enrollment); and about six months after they completed the intervention. In addition to the assessment measures, youth also

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completed questionnaires asking about their satisfaction with each of the intervention components (Summer Institute, coaching, workshops), and they provided continuing information on their educational status (i.e., not in school, attending high school, GED program, or type of higher education). Youth were enrolled in

three waves or subgroups, with each wave beginning in the summer and ending about 16 months later. Youth in the first wave (17 total) have completed all four assessments; youth in the second wave (25 total) are currently completing their final assessment; and youth in the last wave (25 total) have completed their second assessment, with the intervention group still engaged in coaching and mentoring workshops.

IMPACT OF THE SUMMER INSTITUTE

At this point in time, all of the youth have completed their initial assessment and their assessment following the Summer Institute. Thus, this section describes the Summer Institute in more detail and shares some preliminary findings.

Key Summer Institute Activities

The Summer Institute featured information sessions during which youth learned about the different options for higher education, the advantages of earning a college degree, and resources for paying college tuition. Youth also assessed their current educational status and heard about various options for high school graduation and credit recovery. Participants were exposed to both university and community college campuses, and completed a variety of activities, such as mapping their career pathways, that encouraged them to dream about their educational futures. The Institute also sponsored a number of panels during which young adults with shared experience around foster care and mental health discussed their experiences regarding their educational goals. Two young adult "All-Stars" from FosterClub, a national leadership group for young people in foster care, assisted with Institute activities and provided informal mentoring. The youth stayed in college

dorms, and all activities were held on college campuses. At the Institute, participants had the opportunity to connect with other youth who had similar life experiences and educational goals, and each cohort left as a very bonded group. Topics introduced at the Institute were followed up with more in-depth discussions during near-peer coaching sessions and mentoring workshops. In this context, the Institute's goal was to excite youth about higher education, help them see it as within their reach, and launch their individual planning and preparation activities.

Impact of Summer Institute on Assessment Outcomes

Compared to youth in the control group, youth in the intervention group showed encouraging change from initial assessment to post-Institute assessment, about a month later. Independent t-tests comparing group scores showed that while the intervention and control group did not differ significantly at baseline on any of the measures, there were significant differences between the two groups when they were assessed after the Summer Institute. For example, compared to the control group, youth in the intervention group had significantly higher scores on measures of quality of life, self-determination, confidence in college planning, hopefulness, and involvement in planning for transition to adulthood. The differences between groups (intervention vs. control) after the Institute can also be understood through effect sizes obtained for the mean difference between the groups for each measure, which, at Time 2, ranged from .31 for a measure that evaluated mental health recovery (considered moderate) to .85 on a measure that assessed self-determination (a large effect size). While the consistency and strength of these positive findings across measures are promising, they should be interpreted with caution given the relatively small sample size and short period of time between assessments. More sophisticated analyses will be done following collection of remaining data, and will assess whether post-Institute improvements are maintained, reduced, or enhanced over time.

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Youth Perceptions of Summer Institute

Feedback from youth regarding their experiences at the Summer Institute further highlights the importance of the event in helping young people feel like college is within their reach; it also helps to distinguish which elements or activities of the Summer Institute were most critical. Immediately following the Institute, youth were asked to complete a brief evaluation which gathered information about their experiences during the event; response options for each question were on a four-point Likert scale ("not at all", "a little", "quite a bit", and "a lot"). Youth were asked

to rate the extent to which the Institute: 1) was useful, 2) was enjoyable, 3) made them more interested in going to college, 4) helped them learn how to prepare for college, and 5) made them feel more confident about preparing for college. As shown in Figure 1, for each item, at least 80% of youth responded “quite a bit” or “a lot”, suggesting that participants felt the Institute was extremely worthwhile.

Key quotes from the qualitative feedback also suggest the Institute was transformative, with participants commenting:

- “It helped me prepare for my future by educating me on resources.”; “I learned about financial aid, scholarships, tutoring, colleges, and it was definitely beneficial to me.”
- “The coaches were helpful to me and could relate to what I’ve gone through so it was easier to trust them.”
- “I enjoyed the panels because they showed me that people went through a lot and still made it.”
- “I liked hearing from the college students because it gave a realistic perspective on what college life is like.”; “I’ve always planned on it [college] but with the help I know about, I want to even more.”
- “It helped because we could talk about anything in life at the Institute. I was not judged and [I] left feeling more sure of my choices.”
- “Better Futures has opened my eyes to a lot of resources and services that I didn’t know were available to me.”; “Because of it and my coach, I feel a lot more secure and excited about my future.”
- “I made a lot of new friends, made connections, had FUN!”; “Really fun – Living like a college student in dorms and such was pretty cool”; “I already knew what I needed to do, but now I have a better idea of how I can actually go about getting it done.”
- And one youth summed it up as, “It changed my life!”

CONCLUSION

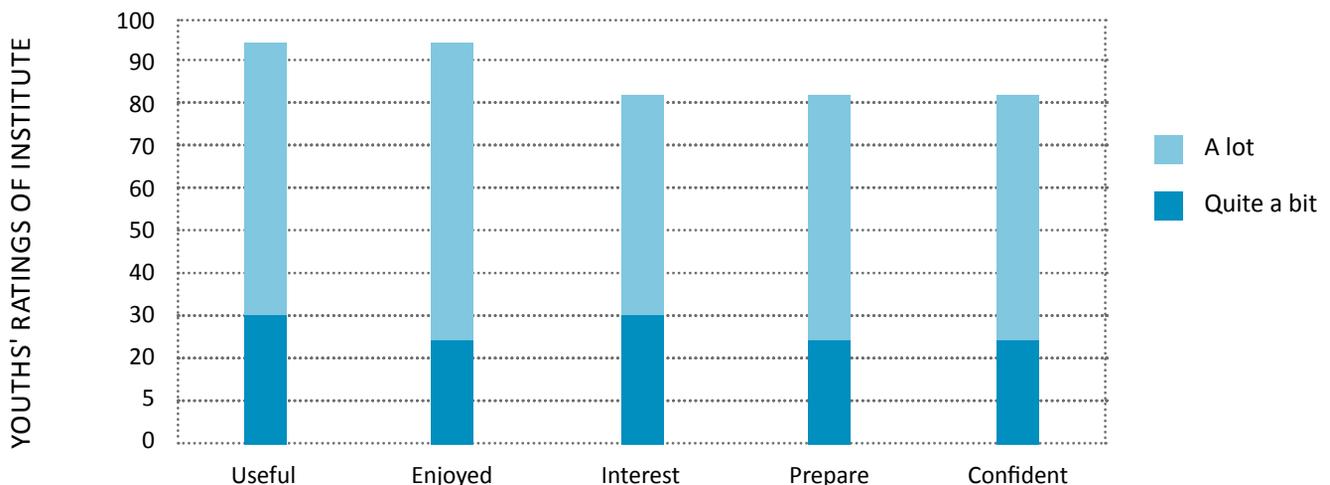
These findings suggest the Summer Institute was meaningful and impactful for the youth participants. Thus far, preliminary data from participants in waves 1 and 2 indicate that after youth completed the intervention phase of the Better Futures project, they were more likely to have actually applied to and been accepted into a college (61%), compared to youth in the control group (33%).

Several components of the Better Futures project make it unique. First is the diversity among participants. Approximately 70% of youth at the Summer Institute were engaged in mental health services, with almost half currently taking mental health medication. Furthermore, almost one-third of youth participating in the Summer Institute received special education services and 8% also received developmental disability services. To date, programs focused on supporting the higher education goals of youth in foster care have not been inclusive, and youth with disabilities (particularly developmental disabilities) are often underrepresented or excluded.

The direct emphasis within the Better Futures Project on mental health is another distinct feature. While youth in foster care are significantly more likely than youth in the general population to experience a significant mental health condition, this is rarely addressed in programs designed to support their participation in higher education. However, identifying and addressing mental health challenges faced by youth in foster care are key components of success. For many of the youth, participation in Better Futures has marked the first time that they were exposed to discussions focused on normalizing their experience of mental health issues, and affirming their strengths, including the knowledge, skills, and resilience they have developed



FIGURE 1. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF SUMMER INSTITUTE



through their foster care and mental health experiences. Across all project components, the youth in the intervention meet and learn from a variety of near-peers who also have experienced complex lives and many stressors, and who ultimately have achieved success in higher education. Their peer coaches support youth even when the adults doubt their capacities for success and fear that their mental health issues will worsen if they try new activities. Coaches also encourage youth around self-care and work with their mental health providers and foster parents to support them in obtaining effective mental health services. During their 10 months in the Better Futures intervention, many youth experience other stressful life events, which include placement changes or running away, pregnancy and parenthood, and/or mental health crises and hospitalization. Coaches try to remain in contact with youth during these periods by offering a caring presence, continuing to highlight youths' strengths, helping youth consider their options and think through decisions, and supporting youth in continuing to work on their higher education goals, which sometimes enables youth to preserve some degree of normality and hope in the midst of chaos. Youth and coaches also discuss the importance of strategic disclosure of mental health and foster care status – for example, in college application essays, in order to access higher education accommodations. Thus, Better Futures aims to empower and sensitively support youth in normalizing and addressing mental health issues as a facet of their overall process of preparing for and attending higher education.

We hope that findings from Better Futures will ultimately underscore the capacities of youth in foster care, youth with mental health issues, and youth having both experiences, to successfully prepare for and participate in higher education, when provided with youth-directed and responsive support. We also hope that knowledge gained from the Better Futures Project will help catalyze increased supports and access for youth with foster care and mental health experiences across the continuum of higher education services, making it possible for these youth, like many of their peers, to realize their dreams for higher education.



Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University.
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AUTHORS

Lee Ann Phillips is Project Manager for the Better Futures Project at Pathways to Positive Futures.

Shereen Oca will be an educational psychology doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the fall. She was a Better Futures research intern.

Sarah Geenen is Co-Principal Investigator for the Better Futures Project at Pathways to Positive Futures.

Laurie Powers is Co-Principal Investigator for the Better Futures Project at Pathways to Positive Futures.