



Exploring College Student Identity Among Young People With Foster Care Histories and Mental Health Challenges

There is growing awareness and focus on the mental health challenges faced by underrepresented student groups in postsecondary education, such as those from minority populations or lower socioeconomic status.^{1,2} Young adults with foster care histories are a known student population where elevated mental health difficulties may impact student identity development, academic performance, and college retention. Recent studies have shown that students transitioning from foster care can struggle with the psychological effects of past trauma as they move into and through post-secondary education.^{3,4} Further studies have shown that students with foster care histories have themselves identified mental health challenges during the transition from high school to college, noting the importance of access to appropriate mental health services and suggesting that mental health challenges that go unresolved could be a cause of students leaving school.⁵

Among those who do enroll in postsecondary education, students with foster care backgrounds have a 34% dropout rate compared to 18% among similar low-income and first-generation students,⁶ and this relative dropout rate was more recently reported as 28% versus 12%.⁷ Research also reveals that some college students with foster care histories may specifically struggle with self-reliance versus support-seeking when they reach campus^{3,4} and may have difficulty finding resources that are responsive to their unique history and needs.⁸ Such foster care-related experiences introduce potential tensions that may make it more difficult for these post-secondary students to develop an emergent student identity and persist towards graduation along a typical pathway.

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The Current Study

For this study, researchers from Pathways Research and Training Center at Portland State University explored the perspectives of college students with foster care histories and self-identified mental health conditions. Researchers aimed to better understand how the relationship between students' foster care identity and their newly forming student identities might impact academic success. We conducted interviews with students participating in the FUTURES intervention efficacy study, which evaluated the impact of a 9-month self-determination coaching program for students enrolled in their first two years of college

at Portland State University, Portland Community College, or Mt. Hood Community College. Interview participants (N=18) were 72% female, 78% identified as non-white or mixed race, and 28% identified as LGBTQIA. The research team conducted thematic analysis of the interview transcripts by iteratively organizing inductive codes into broader themes and developing related findings. Four themes were developed related to the complexities of the foster student experience – including mental health challenges and other life stressors, and their impact on developing student identities in postsecondary education.



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Study Findings

A large portion of the participants in our sample described *Feelings of Otherness*, or feeling “different,” “weird,” or like they “don’t fit” as a result of having been in foster care, or talked about having related life experiences (such as moving between multiple foster placements in adolescence) that generally set them apart from other students. A general lack of knowledge or inquiry about the foster care experience on campus was also pervasive, with one student noting, “The majority of the professors don’t understand [my lived experience].” Many students also recounted difficulty sharing their life story, or wrestling with their foster care identities and the fear of being singled out on campus, even when they needed assistance.

Another theme, *Stacking Stressors*, revealed that experiences of mental health stress, academic stress, and social stress were interconnected and difficult to separate from the participant perspective. Compounded problems, including past trauma or foster care related issues (e.g., not having family support or secure finances), could often conflict with new academic expectations. As one student put it, “College itself is very stressful, and then [not having] help to manage health stresses...it was so much.”



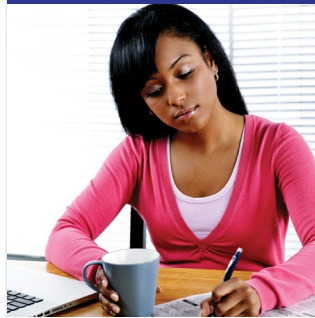
The Four Themes

1 Feelings of Otherness



"The majority of the professors don't understand [my lived experience]."

2 Stacking Stressors



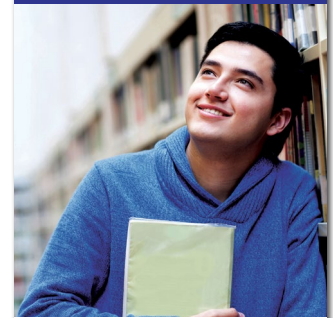
"College itself is very stressful, and then [not having] help to manage health stresses...it was so much."

3 Self-Reliance Vs. Support-Seeking



"[Y]ou don't tend to rely on others to...make your experience better."

4 Student Experiences on Campus



"...Having people that we could relate to in the mental health center would be super useful."

Many students also described confronting challenges related to the next theme, *Self-Reliance Versus Support-Seeking*. Some described self-reliance as a default strategy, a necessity, or an adopted mindset due to their experiences in foster care, with one student recounting "[Y]ou don't tend to rely on others to...make your experience better." Students described often relying only on themselves instead of seeking support from others, especially after campus resources (such as mental health services) had failed to adequately help them.

Participants also made several suggestions for *Improving Student Experiences on Campus*, asking for services that would support their foster care experiences and development of a new student identity, including more campus-based mental health services, and especially individualized support from people who understand their foster care identities and lived experiences. A student confirmed the benefit of having such tailored support available, saying, "I just think having people that we could relate to in the mental health center would be super useful."



Discussion

Study participants make a case for improved campus-based services for students with foster care backgrounds to help with challenges related to compounding stressors in college, balancing self-reliance with help-seeking when needed, and developing interpersonal relationships that reduce feelings of otherness. Recommendations for improving student experiences include mental health services provided by people familiar with the lived experience of foster care, access to foster student-specific programs, and campus-wide efforts to improve the conditions for academic success in the face of difficult personal histories and mental health challenges.

Further, this study reveals that foster care-related identity and experiences likely play a critical role in a students' academic success. Our themes reinforce prior findings that these students may experience persistent mental health challenges related to their foster care involvement, which may inhibit college success if not specifically addressed.^{9,10,5,3,7}

Our study also confirms both the potential tension of self-reliance versus interdependence among college students with foster care histories, as well as the related challenge of successfully finding support that attends to their specific lived experiences and present needs.⁸ Students in this study were more likely to engage with campus-based services that are individualized and provided by support people – including faculty, staff, and counselors – who understand their lived experiences and foster care background and thus offer a “safe” and trustworthy resource to explain their personal story to or to develop a relationship with as they navigate college challenges.

Implications and Next Steps

Our findings suggest that campus decision-makers review available student resources as they relate to mental health support and specific services for foster students, and consider the development of dedicated programming, including consistent direct outreach, and connections to similar peers, near-peer mentors, academic advisors, advocates, and mental health specialists. In evaluating one such dedicated college support program, 77% of student participants responded that the support provided was so helpful they “can’t graduate without it.”¹¹ Improved understanding from

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both a whole-campus and individual staff/faculty perspective could reduce feelings of otherness and help build a supportive sense of place to cultivate students' academic identities, while also honoring the complexities and needs of their foster care identity. Further, considering academic success through the lens of developing college student identities reveals areas for new or renewed focus in supporting the integration of foster care identity and experiences, including related mental health challenges, within the larger process of emergent college student identity.



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