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Foster Youth: Higher Education Outcomes and Federal Support

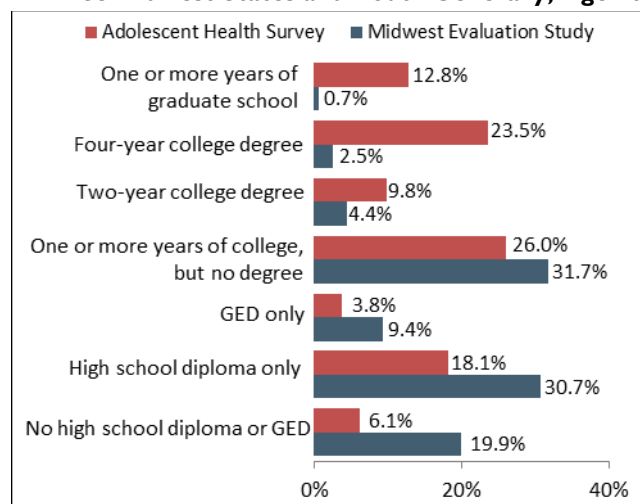
This brief provides information about the challenges for current and former foster youth (hereinafter, “foster youth,” unless further specified) in enrolling in and completing higher education. It also discusses federal financial resources for foster youth. Federal programs that are intended to encourage college attendance provide student support services and financial aid. These and other education-focused programs targeted to foster youth have generally not been rigorously evaluated to determine if they assist the population in completing college.

Educational Outcomes

According to the research literature, foster youth are more likely to face challenges in graduating from high school. Foster youth face a number of obstacles that can begin in elementary school and likely contribute to lower test scores and lower graduation rates. Such obstacles include frequent moves while in foster care that lead to multiple and mid-year school changes, absences from school, disciplinary issues, and unmet special education needs.

A study by researchers with the University of Chicago is tracking the educational and other outcomes of youth who emancipated from foster care in three Midwestern states. The most recent survey of these youth found that at age 26, 20% did not have a high school diploma or GED, compared to about 6% of their peers (as reported in the Adolescent Health Survey). They were also less likely to have attended at least one year of college by age 26 than other young adults generally—26% vs. 32%.

Figure 1. Education Outcomes of Foster Care Alumni in Three Midwest States and Youth Generally, Age 26



Source: CRS, based on Mark E. Courtney et al., *Midwest Evaluation on the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*, 2011.

This finding is consistent with multiple studies showing lower college attendance rates for foster youth. Lower high

school completion rates for foster youth are a contributing factor. Other factors may include a youth’s inability to meet selective admission standards at four-year schools; the cost of higher education; a belief by the youth that college is not for them; and a lack of knowledge about the process of applying to college, including high school course work needed, how and when to apply, and how to access financial aid.

As shown in **Figure 1**, fewer than 7% of the foster care alumni in the Midwest Evaluation study received a two-year (4.4%) or four-year (2.5%) college degree, compared to over one-third of young adults the same age. A May 2016 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified that barriers to persisting in school can include that former foster youth in college have few emotional and familial supports, are often preoccupied with the need to support themselves financially, and struggle to overcome a weak academic foundation.

Federal Student Support Programs

Federal funding and other supports for current and former foster youth are in place to help these youth aspire to, pay for, and graduate from college. The Higher Education Act (HEA) authorizes college preparatory and student support programs that target this population, among other vulnerable populations. Nearly all of these programs are collectively known as the TRIO programs, administered by the Department of Education (ED). Under the HEA, TRIO-funded grantees are expected to identify and make services, such as mentoring and tutoring, available to youth who were in foster care at age 16 or older (whenever this is appropriate). The HEA also authorizes services for current and former foster youth through Student Support Services—a TRIO program intended to improve the retention and graduation rates of disadvantaged college students—which includes temporary housing during breaks in the academic year. TRIO funds are competitively awarded by ED to institutions of higher education and other entities. The funds do not always serve eligible current and former foster youth at every institution. In FY2016, Congress appropriated \$900 million to TRIO programs.

Separately, the HEA authorizes additional supports through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to establish demonstration projects that provide comprehensive support services for students who were in foster care (or homeless) at age 13 or older. FIPSE is a grant program that seeks to support the implementation of innovative educational reform ideas and evaluate how well they work. As specified in the law, the projects can provide housing to former foster youth when housing at an educational institution is closed or unavailable to other students. In FY2015, Congress appropriated \$7.7 million to FIPSE; no funding was appropriated for FY2016.

Current and former foster youth may also receive educational services under the Chafee Foster Care Independence program (CFCIP), administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The program authorizes states to use CFCIP funding for services that assist youth in the transition to adulthood, including for college preparatory activities and selected expenses associated with higher education (though not to cover the cost of attendance). States may also dedicate as much as 30% of their program funding to room and board for youth ages 18 to 21. This includes youth enrolled in college or another postsecondary institution. HHS advises that Chafee funds can also be used for learning activities that do not pertain to higher education, such as General Equivalency Degree (GED) programs. Youth are eligible for CFCIP-funded services until age 21 if they are likely to remain in foster care (as determined by each state), have aged out of care, or leave foster care at age 16 or older for adoption or kinship guardianship. CFCIP funding is a mandatory appropriation of \$140 million annually to states based on their relative share of children in care throughout the United States, with each state receiving a minimum amount (e.g., “hold harmless” requirement).

Federal Financial Assistance

Youth who qualify for the CFCIP are eligible for the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program, administered by HHS. Vouchers of up to \$5,000 annually are available for full- or part-time attendance at an institution of higher education, as defined by the HEA. Youth are eligible to receive ETVs until age 21, except that youth receiving a voucher at age 21 may continue to participate in the voucher program until age 23 if they are enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program and are making satisfactory progress toward completing that program. Approximately 16,400 to 17,400 youth have received ETVs in the most recent years data are available.

Table 1. Number of Students Receiving ETVs

Year	Number of Students
FY2007	12,692
FY2008	16,400
FY2009	16,500
FY2010	17,400
FY2011	17,117
FY2012	16,554
FY2013	16,548

Source: CRS correspondence with HHS, and HHS budget requests.

Funding for the ETV program is discretionary and is distributed in the same way as CFCIP funding but without the hold harmless requirement. The program received FY2016 appropriations of \$43.3 million.

Current and former foster youth can also apply for federal student aid, including the Federal Pell Grant program and William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan program. Both are authorized under the HEA. Youth can qualify as

independent students if they were in foster care at age 13 or older (and are under age 24 and meet certain other requirements). This means that the level of federal financial support offered is likely to be higher because only the student’s income and assets are counted and not that of his or her parent(s), to determine federal financial support. The May 2016 GAO report found that 72,000 current and former foster youth who were considered financially independent received federal financial aid in 2013-2014 (this is less than 1% of students receiving financial aid generally). **Table 2** indicates that a greater share of foster youth receiving student aid attended two-year colleges than their peers.

Table 2. Colleges Attended by Foster Youth and All Other Undergraduates Receiving Federal Student Aid

	Foster Youth	All Other Students
Public Four-Year	30%	36%
Public Two-Year	43%	29%
For-profit	15%	18%
Nonprofit	12%	17%

Source: CRS, based on GAO Report GAO-16-343, May 2016.

Federal law does not address the length of time that applicants must have been in foster care, or the necessary reasons for exiting care, to be eligible to claim independent status; however, the federal financial aid form, known as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), instructs current and former foster youth that the financial aid administrator at their school may require them to provide proof that they were in foster care. As directed by P.L. 113-76, ED has modified the electronic FAFSA form to inform self-identified foster youth that they may qualify for federal financial assistance, including the ETV program. The form also provides them with contact information for state child welfare personnel. Foster youth cannot receive a combination of federal student aid and ETVs that totals more than the actual cost of attendance, or otherwise claim the same expenses under multiple federal programs.

The GAO report highlighted that many foster youth are not aware of resources for college. GAO recommended that ED, in consultation with HHS, create webpages directed to foster youth so they can more readily find such information. In addition, GAO recommended that ED and HHS should jointly study potential options for enabling child welfare caseworkers and other adults who work with foster youth to more actively assist them with college planning. In June 2016, ED published the “Foster Care Transition Toolkit,” in partnership with HHS and other federal departments, about education and other resources for youth aging out of care.

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