



Perceived value of a campus-based college support program by students who aged out of foster care



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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to evaluate core components of one college support program at a midwest university from the perspective of student users who have aged out of foster care and to assess the perception of these supports in the context of the program's college graduation rate. Ninety-five students enrolled in the program completed a 44-question survey to evaluate the program's services. Student perceived value of these services is presented along with graduation rates for students from the program. The findings confirm the importance of financial aid, housing, and adult guidance for this population in successfully graduating from college. While the 30% graduation rate for students from the program far exceeds the national average for degree completion of students with a background in foster care, it is below the rate for a comparable first-generation student population at the university. We conclude that while key components of a college support program like financial aid, housing, and trained adult staff guidance are necessary in supporting students with a background in foster care attain postsecondary success, they are not sufficient to adequately explain graduation rates.

1. Introduction

There were 427,910 children living in a foster care placement in the United States as of June 2016 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Often having been removed from biological parents due to physical and/or emotional abuse or neglect, children in foster care face a myriad of challenges. One particular area of challenge is that youth and young adults with foster care histories have higher rates of educational disadvantages and poorer educational outcomes when compared to similar age groups in the general population (Pecora, 2012; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). The effort to support young people in foster care to pursue postsecondary education was formalized into policy with the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which specifically addresses challenges faced by youth emancipating from foster care and the barriers they face entering their emerging adult years after case closure (Dworsky, Smithgall, & Courtney, 2014).

While postsecondary education is a desire of many youth from foster care, the achievement outcomes are dismal (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Reilly, 2003; Jones, 2010). Studies reveal

that these youth experience significant educational disadvantages, with only half of youth in foster care completing high school and < 20% taking any college-prep classes (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Wolanin, 2005; Pecora et al., 2005; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Sheehy et al., 2000). Students in foster care score 15 to 20 percentile points below others in statewide-standardized tests (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006; Beisse, Atkins, Scantlen, & Tyre, 2011; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Additionally, < 20% of foster children who qualify for college actually attend versus 32% of at-risk students with the same intellectual ability but who never lived in foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003). It is estimated that only 3–11% of individuals from foster care complete a bachelor's degree (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005; Emerson, 2006). In comparison, U.S. census data indicate college attendance for all individuals between 16 and 24-years-old is between 60 and 70% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) with approximately 33% of 25 to 34-year-olds in the general population holding a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

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1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Barriers to higher education for youth in foster care

Research has concluded that youth placed in foster care face significant barriers in obtaining a college education. While recent studies have added to the understanding of the obstacles these youth face, much of the information comes from studies that are at least seven years old. One major obstacle is poor academic preparedness, which may be linked to the fact that youth living in foster care change schools at higher rates than their non-foster peers and these more frequent changes are linked to lower academic performance (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). McKellar and Cowan (2011) found that students lose four to six months of academic progress every time there is a switch in schools primarily as the result of adjustment issues and delays in record transfers and assessment for special services. Additionally, teenagers in foster care have a higher enrollment in special-education classes than non-foster care youth (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006), and are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or need to repeat a grade (Educational Outcomes, 2007; Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2004). The combination of these challenges begins to explain why students with a background in foster care tend to score below their peers on standardized academic measures and are significantly less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a college degree.

But academic factors are not the only barriers to higher education. Dworsky and Perez (2010) identified financial aid, housing, and a sense of belonging as supports students with a background in foster care need to be successful in college. Similarly, Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap (2010) identified lack of financial resources, the need to have a full-time job, lack of transportation, and parenting responsibilities as key obstacles to former foster youth being successful in college. Other studies have looked at mental health challenges and life skills deficiencies as factors impeding former foster youth in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Youth with a background in foster care have been shown to have higher incidences of mental health challenges and a greater propensity for emotional and behavioral challenges (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; McMillen et al., 2005). Kyles, Unrau, and Root (2016) reported that college students with foster care histories perceive themselves to have greater struggles with mental health stressors compared to their peers; and, they attribute these struggles in part to their experiences in foster care. This population also struggles to secure necessary supports and skills to assume responsibilities in adulthood. For example, it is estimated that by the age of 18, about two-thirds of young people from foster care do not have basic resources such as a driver's license or money for necessities (Pecora et al., 2006). During these emerging adulthood years, young people from foster care are more likely than their non-foster peers to struggle with establishing secure growth in areas of finances, employment, housing, physical and mental health, relationships, and identity (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). These practical and systemic obstacles provide additional insight into why foster youth are less likely than their peers to enroll and succeed in college.

1.1.2. Support for foster youth attending college

In response to the barriers to postsecondary education faced by youth from foster care, Congress established the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program in 2001 as an amendment to the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. The ETV Program makes vouchers of up to \$5000 per year available to young adults coming from foster care for costs to attend institutions of higher education. In addition to federal ETV funds that youth from foster care are eligible to receive to help pay for college tuition, many states also provide financial assistance through state-specific programs.

A recent study found that students from foster care enrolled in a four-year university are more likely to drop out of school than similar low-income first-generation students who have never lived in foster

care (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). Davis (2006) noted that financial support alone is not adequate to meet the needs of college students from foster care; and, Emerson (2006) stressed the importance of campus programs to provide students with academic and social supports (see also, Casey Family Programs, 2010). Dworsky and Perez (2010) gathered data from a nonrandom sample of 98 college students supported by a campus program for former foster youth in Washington and California and identified key supports students valued in a campus support program. While students identified financial aid and housing assistance to be extremely important, this study also found that students placed a high value on adult guidance, whether in the form of academic advice on course selections and choosing a major, or mentoring support. This study concluded that a key component of campus support programs for students from foster care was the sense of belonging these programs provide; students were more likely to focus on the importance of support programs providing a sense of family than to focus on the financial assistance of these programs.

Research conducted with students from foster care at two community colleges in California reported similar findings (Cantú, 2013). These students reported that having a program on campus that focuses on their unique challenges was important in their ability to meet their educational goals. Students felt more connected because of their involvement in a program that understood and addressed their needs. This combination of high receptivity to student support services along with high academic motivation was also found to be linked to awareness of lack of family support among college students from foster care (Unrau et al., 2012). While college students from foster care face many foster-care related barriers in common, existing campus-based programs vary widely in scope, staffing and services; and, there is a need for more detailed program descriptions (Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016).

1.2. Purpose

As the number of college support programs for degree-seeking students with a background in foster care has grown (Salazar, 2012), the question arises as to the nature and efficacy of these programs. Salazar and her colleagues focused on the lack of clearly articulated and evidence-based postsecondary support approaches for youth with a background in foster care and proposed a theoretical intervention approach (Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016a; Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016c). Other researchers, including Dworsky and Perez (2010), Geiger et al. (2016), and Hernandez and Naccarato (2010), have stressed the need to assess the impact of current campus support programs on graduation rates. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate core components of one college support program from the perspective of student users who have aged out of foster care and assess the impact of these supports on graduation rates. Two main research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. What is the perceived importance of a campus based program, as well as specific program components, designed to support college students who aged out of foster care by its student users?
2. How do point-in-time perceptions of student users about the program align with graduation rates over time?

1.2.1. Campus-based program

The above research questions are addressed in this study by focusing on one campus-based program that was created when, Western Michigan University, a large Midwestern university responded to the challenge of researching, learning, and serving students from foster care through the establishment of its Seita Scholars program¹ in 2008. The

¹ The program name honors Dr. John Seita, a former foster care youth, a three-time Western Michigan University alumnus and a national advocate for children in foster care.

campus-based program is comprehensive in addressing the needs of college students who have experienced foster care through financial scholarships, continuous housing during semesters and semester breaks, and comprehensive life coaching support by trained “campus coaches.” Each student, known as a Seita Scholar, is assigned a full-time professional staff with a master's degree that is trained in the program's coaching model. The main goal of the program is to increase graduation rates among students from foster care, and this goal is pursued with a view to ensuring that each graduate is also prepared for the transition from college to career given the absence of a family safety net. In 2007, the year before the program's launch, financial aid records indicated that only 12 students from foster care were enrolled at the university. The program's inaugural cohort in fall 2008 comprised 55 students who had aged out of foster care and arrived from 16 (out of a possible 83) counties within the state, each with a unique culture in managing local foster care services. Each subsequent year expanded the number of counties represented and brought a new cohort of approximately 50 students aging out of foster care to the university. At the time of this study, funding and staff resources capped program total enrollment (new and continuing students) at 150 students per year.

The program's model of support was created by learning the perceptions and experiences of the students in the early cohorts. Understanding the experience of program support from the perspective of individuals with lived experience in foster care is essential to designing effective programs to support them (Unrau, 2007). The program start-up effort was fueled by the understanding that successful transition to adulthood by youth aging out of the foster care system required attention to seven life domains—education, finances, housing, health, relationships, identity, and life skills (Casey Family Programs, 2001; Unrau, Hamilton, & Putney, 2010). Student users of the program are referred to as Seita Scholars in recognition of their expertise in the lived experience of foster care; a living arrangement that is not commonly known about or understood outside of the child welfare arena. Their input and involvement was routinely gathered and incorporated in program decision-making. Below, we summarize three categories of the program's design of student support; descriptions of some specific key program elements are included in Appendix A.

1.2.1.1. Financial and housing support. Students in the program receive financial support through a tuition scholarship that is funded by the university, plus assistance with accessing and managing other financial resources and scholarships specific to youth who have experienced foster care. In addition, targeted financial incentives are used to promote academic achievement and provide other opportunities such as study abroad, paid internships, and funds for professional attire (see Appendix A). Each financial support strategy gives emphasis to minimizing student's educational debt. Students in the program live on campus with the university offering them a range of campus housing options (e.g., apartments, residence halls) to choose from. Payment for housing during the academic year comes from their financial aid package. Additionally, the program's budget covers the extra costs associated with campus housing during semester breaks when most residence halls close. Students who do not have an option for safe and stable housing during university breaks are invited to stay on campus in one residence hall that is kept open for this purpose.

1.2.1.2. Coaching support. Students are assigned a Campus Coach who is trained in a life coaching approach that is specific to supporting youth and young adults transitioning out of foster care (Unrau & Bennett, 2016). Students are assigned a primary Campus Coach who works with them to develop strengths and learn from struggles across the seven life domains mentioned above. Coaching is a specific helping approach that emphasizes partnership, goal setting, and maximizing motivation and potential for engaging in college and making progress toward graduation and career. It is distinct from other adult guidance roles familiar to young adults, such as therapists, mentors, and parents.

While coaching emerged in the 1980s with influences from the world of sports, business, counseling, education, and consulting (Brock, 2008), the program developed its own coaching model to address the needs of college students from foster care. Coaches target relationship skills and achievement goals with students, while focusing on specific knowledge, insight and skills needed among young adults who have experienced the adversity of foster care. In particular, coaches support students by addressing exposure gaps necessary to navigate the transition to young adulthood. The concept of exposure gaps emerged in the start-up years of the program from observations and discussions with students in the early cohorts about the obstacles they faced. In sum, many students shared the perspective that their life experiences did not necessarily impede them from learning what might be considered typical developmental milestones, but rather the opportunity, or exposure, to learn them never happened. Some examples include students who had never been exposed to grocery shopping, visiting a bank, dressing for special occasions, talking with professionals to explore career interests, and so on. Thus, exposure gaps are not remedial in nature but represent missing pieces of knowledge, skills, and insight that are often experienced by individuals with a background in foster care (Hoffman & Bennett, 2017).

A core skill of coaching is the 3-step structured coaching interaction (see Appendix A) that is designed to respond to real-time learning needs of young adults, and to proactively address problems and opportunities that arise over time. The primary target of coaching is educational achievement, but all seven life domains mentioned earlier (see Casey Family Programs, 2001) are routinely addressed to support progress toward graduation and career transition. It is common to pair multiple life domains when addressing student challenges. For example, coaches will monitor students' academic progress, which is especially critical during the first two years of college when students are most vulnerable to dropping out (Gillum, Lindsay, Murray, & Wells, 2016; Salazar, 2012), and help students to discover and access funding sources needed to fill gaps in aid (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Complete coaching interactions vary in length of time, and are expected to happen multiple times per week to create a coaching pattern of high frequency and short-duration. The pattern of coaching interactions is meant to be responsive to the need-to-know trajectory of young adult learning, and is intentionally different from traditional counseling sessions. The ideal target ratio of coach to students is 1:25. The majority of coaching interactions happen during the business hours of the program (week-days), however, coaching is available to students 24 h per day, 365 days per year on an on-call “after hours” basis.

1.2.1.3. Academic support. In addition to other academic support services generally available on campus, the students are required to participate in two program-designed efforts to maximize scholastic success. First, a weeklong summer orientation is held on campus for students prior to their freshman year. Campus Coaches and peer mentors from the program help students with specific challenges of transitioning from foster care placement to the university, as well as acquainting them with program staff and expectations. Second, students are enrolled in a designated section of a first-year seminar that is a common core course for freshman at the university. This class addresses key skills college students need to achieve academic success and which are not always a part of the college preparation training that students with a background in foster care have received. The section in which the students are enrolled is exclusive to program participants and taught by a staff-student team comprised of a Campus Coach and a peer Seita Scholar who has an established record of academic success, as well as engagement in the program.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sampling frame for this study included 126 students pursuing a baccalaureate degree during the spring 2016 semester at a large 4-year university in the Midwest United States. All target subjects were enrolled in a campus-based support program designed for students who had been state foster care wards on or after their 14th birthdays. A total of 95 students responded to the survey for a response rate of 75%.

Of these 95 respondents, 74% were female and 26% male. The majority identified with a minority race/ethnic group, including 45% Black/African American, 13% bi-or multi-racial, 6% Asian, 5% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% other, while 28% identified as White only. Respondents varied in length of enrollment at the university based on their cohort of entry: 33% were enrolled in their first year, 26% in their second year, 13% in their third year, 15% in their fourth year, and the remaining 13% were enrolled in their fifth year or longer at the time of the survey.

Compared to the general university population, the students who had aged out of foster care were more likely to be first-time-in-any-college (FTIAC) students (75% vs. 15%). Compared to the university FTIAC population, students from the program who are FTIAC were more likely to be female (67% vs. 51%) and more than twice as likely to be a minority race (56% vs. 26%). Academic preparation is another area that differentiated students from foster care from their peers. Specifically, average high school grade point average (GPA) for FTIAC foster care students was significantly lower at 3.08 ($sd = 0.36$) compared to 3.29 ($sd = 0.48$) for the general FTIAC population admitted to the same university ($t = 9.56$, $df = 271$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the mean ACT score for FTIAC students from foster care at 18.8 ($sd = 2.99$) was significantly lower than the average ACT score of 22.1 ($sd = 3.81$) for all other FTIAC freshmen ($t = 18.20$, $df = 271$, $p < 0.001$).

2.2. Design, procedure and instrumentation

All target subjects were invited to complete a 44-question survey using a web-based platform to evaluate the program's services. The survey consisted of 32 closed-ended (with likert-type ratings) and 12 open-ended questions and addressed the three program supports identified earlier: financial support (13 questions), coaching support (21 questions) and academic support (10 questions). Targeted subjects were informed about the on-line survey opportunity through a notice in a weekly program newsletter as well as an email from their assigned Campus Coach explaining the purpose of the survey. Because the survey needed to be program specific, one of the authors developed the non-standardized survey with questions based on program documents, staff interviews, and two student focus groups. The two focus groups, one involving 9 participants and a second group of 10 participants, were held to gain insight into how students were experiencing different components of the program. This opportunity to hear from student users about the program designed to benefit them provided the investigators information that was used to determine the specific questions and wording to be included in the web-based survey.²

A paper version of the survey was initially pilot tested with 25 subjects and minor adjustments made before launching the web-based survey to the remaining 101 students. These minor survey adjustments impacted the comparability of data between the paper version and a subsequent web version of the instrument for only one question. Thus, survey results for the affected question do not include data from the 25 subjects who completed the paper survey. The web version of the survey was available to complete for 14 days and every student

received two different reminders from coaches to provide their thoughts about the program by completing a survey. A group incentive of a fully paid outing was offered to the coach and their students with the highest survey completion rate. Coaches were only told how many of their assigned students completed the survey but not which students did so. The study procedures were approved by the university's human subject review board.

Most of the closed-ended survey questions used the following 5-point Likert-type response set to rate the importance of key elements of the program: 1 = Extremely Important (i.e., "I cannot graduate without this support"); 2 = Very Important (i.e., "It will be difficult to graduate without this support"); 3 = Important (i.e., "I can graduate without this support but having it is really helpful"); 4 = Somewhat Important (i.e., "I can graduate without this support but having it is nice"); 5 = Not Important (i.e., "I do not need this support"). Some survey questions focused on ratings of helpfulness where 1 = Extremely Helpful, 2 = Very Helpful, 3 = Somewhat Helpful, 4 = Helpful, 5 = Not Helpful. Other questions were anchored to response sets that were specific to the particular question. Finally, several open-ended questions were included in an effort to gather qualitative data, which provided context for students' quantitative ratings.

3. Results

Overall, survey respondents rated the program very highly. Specifically, 95% of respondents were "extremely" or "very satisfied" with the program and not one respondent was dissatisfied. Additionally, a survey question about program helpfulness revealed that 77% of respondents indicated that the program was so helpful that they "can't graduate without it," 19% specified that "most of the program services were helpful," 2% said they "need only a few of the program's services," and 1% said they "didn't need any services." An additional indicator of respondents' satisfaction with the program was their responses to open-ended questions that asked "what services or supports would further improve the program;" almost 80% of subjects stated that they could not think of anything to add to the program.

The high positively skewed ratings across quantitative survey questions narrowed the range of variability, which limited the scope of statistical analysis. However, the descriptive statistics for individual survey items yielded a list of key program elements ranked by importance and helpfulness from the perspective of the student users. Students consistently confirmed that financial support, housing, and adult guidance, especially from Campus Coaches, are extremely important to their success in college. However, which of these supports is ultimately the most important varied depending on whether students were responding to a closed- or open-ended question. Therefore, the results are presented according to quantitative and qualitative findings. Additionally, graduation rates, which were calculated by the university's office of institutional research, are also presented.

3.1. Quantitative findings

While most quantitative survey questions asked for student user perceptions of the importance of certain program components, a few questions also asked student users to rate the helpfulness of some components. Financial support, housing, and Campus Coaches clearly emerged from the quantitative results as the three most important program supports from the perspective of student users. Quantitative data comparisons were based on mean calculations; and, Table 1 lists each program element in rank order by average importance ratings. The program supports of tuition scholarship and housing during the school year topped the list, with the vast majority of survey participants reporting their belief that they cannot graduate without having tuition support and housing available to them during their enrollment. Other sources of potential income (paid internships, incentives for grades, scholarships) were also highly valued as was assistance navigating the

² For a copy of the survey, contact the first author.

Table 1
Perceived importance rankings of program components by student users.

Importance of supports	N	Mean	Range	SD
1. Financial....Tuition scholarship	95	1.14	2	0.40
2. Housing....Fall/spring semester housing	70 ^a	1.40	4	0.91
3. Financial....Paid internships	94	1.52	4	0.98
4. Financial....Financial incentives for academic performance	94	1.54	3	0.80
5. Financial....Scholarship for study abroad	91	1.55	4	1.13
6. Financial....Help with financial aid	95	1.61	3	0.82
7. Coaching....Campus Coach to work through problems	95	1.67	2	0.75
8. Coaching....Campus Coach to contact when in need of something	95	1.71	2	0.76
9. Financial....Funds for Professional attire	93	1.71	3	1.12
10. Housing....Summer/school break housing	69 ^a	1.78	4	1.33
11. Academic....Help finding a tutor	94	1.81	3	0.96
12. Coaching....State department employee on campus	95	1.96	4	0.99
13. Financial....Help finding a job/work study	94	2.01	5	1.41
14. Coaching....Career mentors	94	2.33	4	1.25
15. Academic....Summer orientation week	91	2.40	4	1.32
16. Financial....Budgeting support	94	2.46	5	1.22
17. Coaching....Identity groups to build community	93	2.71	4	1.30
18. Academic....First-year semester class to reinforce college skills	91	2.88	4	1.32

^a The total respondent population for these questions is lower because the initial paper survey completed by 25 students did not breakdown the housing question into “fall/spring” and “summer/school break” so these surveys are not included in the total.

unfamiliar network of financial aid opportunities.

These quantitative importance ratings also highlight the high value that students from foster care place on the support of their Campus Coach in helping them succeed in college. Whether their Campus Coach is helping them work through a problem or is there to talk whenever the student needs support, participants placed a high importance on the support their Campus Coach provides.

When asked about the helpfulness of the program, the majority of respondents perceive the overall program and their Campus Coach as “extremely helpful” in their progress toward graduation (Table 2). In contrast, specific life skill activities such as graduation plans, benchmark goals, and the seven life domain assessment tool to promote skills awareness were rated as moderately helpful despite the fact that each is a target function of coaching (see Appendix A).

These results make it clear that students place a high value on their Campus Coach to comprehensively support them in their pursuit of a college degree. However, what remains unclear is the relative importance of the specific task activities that Campus Coaches deliver in their interactions with students. This was most revealed when students were asked how many of the seven life domains that make up step one of the coaching interactions they could name. Although the life domains frame the coaching interactions, only 30% of respondents said they could name all seven, 45% indicated they could name four to six of the life domains, while the remainder could name only three or fewer. There was no correlation between number of domains known by students and length of time in the program, as would be expected since duration in the program would increase exposure to coaching interactions. Furthermore, 33% of respondents said they used the seven

Table 2
Perceived helpfulness rankings of coaching components by student users.

Helpfulness of supports	N	Mean	Range	SD
1. Overall program in progressing to graduation	94	1.35	3	0.62
2. Campus Coach in progressing to graduation	94	1.47	2	0.67
a. Coaching: graduation plans ^a	95	1.92	4	1.11
b. Coaching: 7 life domain benchmark goals ^a	95	2.52	4	1.28
c. Coaching Interactions: 7 life domains ^a	93	2.52	4	0.81

^a Defined coaching activities to assist in academic planning and life skills development.

life domains “frequently or regularly,” compared to 48% who used them “sometimes” and 18% who used them “rarely or never.”

3.2. Qualitative findings

Using content analysis (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003), narrative data were analyzed and interpreted. When students were asked the open-ended question “What has been the biggest help in your ability to be successful in college”, one-third of respondents identified a specific person, 18% mentioned “financial support”, and 12% said the campus-support program in general. The specific person most often mentioned by student users was their Campus Coach, with this response given by 61% of students who identified a person as the biggest contributor to their success. Other individuals identified included family members (13%), professors (9%), and other students in the program (7%).

The importance of the Campus Coach in student lives was also evident when students responded to the question “What is the best part about your relationship with your coach?” Ninety-five percent of respondents offered 173 “best” qualities with “helpful”, “supportive”, “reliable”, and “good listener” being mentioned most often. In contrast, when asked, “What is the most challenging part of your relationship with your coach?” 70% of respondents did not identify any challenges, with respondents who did identify a challenge providing 31 different responses. The most frequently mentioned challenges were finding a mutually convenient time to meet (40% of responses) and getting over the initial awkwardness of a new relationship (22% of responses).

Hearing student voice during focus groups provided even further insight into the importance of the Campus Coach. Participants cited multiple examples where Campus Coaches supported them in ways that went above and beyond students' expectations. Many in the focus groups also contrasted the support provided by Campus Coaches with support they have received from university professors and academic advisors. While participants acknowledged the importance of being supported by other university personnel, students attributed greater significance to the support they received from their Campus Coach; an expected result given the latter role was specifically designed to meet the unique needs of students with foster care histories.

3.3. Graduation rates

The university routinely calculates annual graduation rates through its office of institutional research. For this study, the graduation rates for students from foster care (i.e., student users of the program) are presented in comparison to other students enrolled in the same university that are first-time-in-any-college (FTIAC); since 75% of students in the program are FTIAC (compared to 15% in the general student population), this allows for a more direct comparison of graduation rates. The campus-based program for students from foster care at the 4-year university was launched in 2008. Therefore, the 6-year graduation rates are available only for the initial cohorts. The average 6-year graduation rate for FTIAC students from foster care entering in 2008 and 2009 is 30%,³ which is considerably lower than 54% of all FTIAC students completing their degree in 6 years. However, the program's graduation rate of 30% far exceeds the national estimate that 3–11% of young people from foster care earn a baccalaureate degree in six years (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005; Emerson, 2006).

3.4. Limitations

This cross-sectional survey research was exploratory in nature and

³ When all students (non-FTIAC and transfer students) are added into the total count, the program's six-year graduation rate for students from foster care increases to 42%.

subject to the usual limitations of such a design. A noteworthy limitation is selection bias with respect to our sample of respondents who were all actively enrolled in the university during the spring semester of the survey. Students in the program who had dropped out of school prior to the study (i.e., at the end of fall semester or earlier) were not surveyed. Another limitation has to do with the presentation of data from two different time periods. Specifically, the student user perceptions were gathered via a point-in-time survey from enrolled students, while the average graduation rate was calculated from the initial two cohorts. These two different timeframes, as well as the exploratory research design, prevent us from drawing any causal or correlational conclusions that connect program elements and outcomes. Rather, the outcome or graduation data were included to provide important context to the goal of the program, which is to improve graduation rates of young people aging out of foster care.

Another limitation is that the study measured self-perceptions of importance and helpfulness of program resources designed to support college students from foster care. It did not measure actual engagement or uptake of the program services by student users. Thus, the findings of the study are best understood as a measure of the students' beliefs and not their actions. Finally, the program currently does not have sufficient metrics to verify fidelity in how coaches interact with students and is a topic for future research.

4. Discussion

4.1. Financial support, housing, and adult guidance as the most important program supports

Compared to previous research, the results of this study report higher graduation rates. In addition, the findings concur with previous studies that for college students from foster care, financial support, housing, and adult guidance are the most critical supports in their pursuit of a college degree. The perception that financial support is a “must have” by students who have aged out of foster care is not surprising; studies addressing the barriers for students from foster care in achieving postsecondary education consistently identify financial support as an essential need. The critical nature of this support can be understood in light of the high cost of a college education and the limited resources of most young people, especially those from foster care. In 2014, the average yearly cost (tuition, fees, room and board) of a 4-year college degree ranged from \$15,600 to \$40,600, putting the total cost of a college degree exceeding \$60,000 (US Department of Education, 2016). With average student loan debt upon graduation at just over \$29,000, the financial burden associated with earning a college degree can be overwhelming (The Institute for College Access and Success reports, 2014).

For college students from foster care, the need for financial support can feel more burdensome than for college students from the general population. For most emerging adults, those aged 18 to 25-years-old, managing finances is a new experience and one in which they often turn to family members for support and guidance (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adults from foster care are expected to achieve more at an earlier age than their non-foster peers (Okpych, 2012), and since they rarely have continuous and supportive family relationships, the burdens of “independent living,” such as navigating financial aid, fall squarely on them without the benefit of a family safety net (Kools, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). For this reason, it seems critical that programs and policies supporting students from foster care in college advocate for dependable funding throughout the time to degree (e.g., 2-year, 4-year college), and clearly guide students in understanding loan debt. Further investigation is needed to determine the best practices for teaching money management skills (e.g., budgeting, debt forecasting) to students who enter college after emancipating from the foster care system.

Housing during the fall and spring semesters of the academic year was identified as extremely important to students, second only to

tuition scholarship in quantitative rankings. Notably, the university in this study had available student housing on campus, which is not the case for all institutions. Because living on campus during enrollment was a required condition of the program, stable housing for respondents in this study was guaranteed. The option of campus housing during semester breaks (including university closure) was a separate effort that was both coordinated and paid for by the program. Respondent high ranking of semester break housing confirms the importance of this support in filling a known gap of the need for continuous housing for students from foster care. A recent policy research report concluding that “stable housing is important yet elusive” for youth aging out of foster care highlights the housing insecurity that is the reality for youth exiting the foster care system: up to a third of former foster youth experience homelessness and 25–50% face unstable housing conditions (Dion, 2015). Participants in this study echoed the importance of safe and stable housing for students from foster care by identifying housing as a critical need to being successful in college.

The importance of financial supports and housing to students with a background in foster care reinforces that these students do not take basic needs for granted. Indeed, for students from foster care the college experience can be a precarious journey that involves the realization that any mistake or choice that leads to dropping out is accompanied by loss of finances, housing and program safety net, an “all or nothing” proposition. Thus, even with these supports being fixed components of the college support program, the lingering insecurity among students about having enough money or secure housing is unlikely to be resolved. Indeed, students in this study ranked *all* means that the program offers to earn extra income (paid internships, incentives for academic performance, study abroad scholarships, funds for professional attire) as critically important. Concerns over finances were also heard in focus group discussions, with students offering time and again their gratefulness for having the financial support to attend college and their belief they would not be in college without that support.

Yet when asked to list the support that has been the biggest help to students in being successful in college, students identified a specific person almost twice as often as they mentioned financial support. This finding is consistent with the conclusion drawn by Dworsky and Perez (2010) that for most of the students in their study, “what mattered most was always having someone there to help or to turn to for support.” Similarly, Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, and Werrbach (2016) reported that stability and positive relationships with adult mentors and peers plays a role in easing transitions, and reinforcing emotional connections, both of which are hypothesized to correlate positively with educational success.

The childhood experience of most students who have experienced foster care may explain the high value these students place on adult guidance. Placement in foster care interrupts the continuity of caregivers and adult decision makers in the life of a child. Seita (2001) interpreted this as the loss of “family privilege,” which deprives young people of the social capital that comes from being raised continuously in one stable family. In the absence of family privilege, many students from foster care miss out on the benefits that come from having consistent adults to care for and support them continuously into and beyond the emerging adult years. Changes in both living arrangements and the adults appointed to caregiving, which are common in foster care, disturb the developmental process of iterative learning from past mistakes and achievements in a predictable environment. This combination of challenges may result in exposure gaps (Hoffman & Bennett, 2017) described earlier.

In this study, the specific person that students mentioned most often as the biggest help to succeeding in college was their Campus Coach. Having 24-hour access to a coach and having help from a coach to work through problems were both rated as very important; there was not one participant ranking Campus Coach Support as anything less than “important”. Notably, the campus coaches in this study had specialized training about the foster care journey, including related traumatic

stressors common to young adults who have a history in foster care (see Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). But the question requiring further investigation is whether the value students place on Campus Coaches is more a response to the skilled help that these adults provide, the personal nature of the relationship that is formed, or some combination. Understanding the mediating effects of the adult support person (i.e., coach) versus the process of supporting (i.e., coaching) on progress to graduation is critical in the long-term success of the students because the formal coach relationship ends when students drop-out or graduate from the university, while the effects of coaching are intended to be lasting. A related question points to the need to further explore the theory-to-practice application of the coaching model used in the program.

4.2. Indicators of student success

Research indicates that students from foster care have specific needs that a campus support program can address to improve their chances of being successful in obtaining a college degree. Consistent with prior research (i.e., Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005), this study also found that college students from foster care are less well prepared academically (i.e., lower high school grade point average and lower ACT scores) compared to their peers who never experienced foster care. The program investigated in this study provides these students with key supports that research has identified as necessary to help this population of students earn a college degree and in a way that the students themselves report as highly satisfying. Yet students in the campus support program, while far exceeding the national graduation rate for youth from foster care, are graduating at just over half the rate of other FTIAC students on campus.

Understanding that a direct comparison is not possible, the graduation rate in this study is consistent with a recent study that compared four-year university drop out rates of students from foster care with similar low-income first-generation students who had never lived in foster care (Day et al., 2011). Although Day and her colleagues did not separate first-time from transfer students and did not give consideration to cohorts in the analysis, they concluded that students from foster care were almost twice as likely to drop out of college before completing a degree as similar low-income first-generation students (34% compared to 18%). This dropout ratio is consistent with the differences in FTIAC 6-year graduation ratio experienced between these two populations at the university in this study (54% compared to 30%). Given that students from foster care have much to lose by not finishing college, the low rate of graduation raises questions about how students will manage student loan debt, housing needs and loss of a support network after leaving campus. These questions are worthy of future research endeavors.

One potential explanation given by Day and her colleagues for this difference in dropout rates is that students from foster care usually attend college without a strong connection to a caring adult that can provide support to students as they deal with the stresses of college. They cite Mendes (2006) and Haussmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) that suggests a formal source of social support, such as faculty and community mentors, could help compensate for the lack of parental/adult support in the lives of former foster youth and increase the likelihood that these students would persist to graduation. The results of this survey indicate that Campus Coaches are an important and effective adult support for students. The value these students attribute to the relationship with their Campus Coach suggests these students feel a strong connection to a caring adult. Therefore, it would appear that a caring adult is necessary but not sufficient to adequately explain the differences in graduation rates between former foster youth and first-generation students at the university.

Day et al. (2011) suggest another possible explanation for lower graduation rates among students from foster care are barriers these

students face in pursuing postsecondary education including financial aid, social and emotional support, year round housing, and academic tutoring. Addressing these barriers is the goal of many campus support programs targeted at serving students from foster care including the program at the university. In this study, students from foster care reported feeling strongly supported in overcoming these barriers. It is clear that the perception of importance or helpfulness of support for these barriers alone does not adequately explain the differences in graduation rates experienced at the university between students from foster care and first-generation students.

Thus, we conclude that a designated program is perceived as essential, and basic resources including financial assistance, housing, and guidance from adults with specialized training are key components for college success among students who have aged out of foster care. The question remains, what are the specific program elements and essential functions of adult guidance that most effectively help young people from foster care advance toward a college degree? And, were the defined program elements, such as the coaching model, implemented with fidelity? More investigation is needed to understand both the mechanisms of adult guidance provided, as well as other programmatic components that are designed to support students from foster care across life domains affecting their achievement toward college graduation.

4.3. Using survey results to improve program supports and encourage student voice

Soliciting user feedback is a critical step in improving the services that any support program provides. Satisfaction surveys can highlight areas that are meeting their intended objectives as well as areas where users are frustrated and/or dissatisfied with programming components. Standpoint theory argues that individuals who live an experience add a different level of understanding than what is contributed by others who have not lived the experience (Unrau, 2007). In partnering with students from foster care, soliciting student voice is especially important. Youth from foster care have not historically experienced those in authority valuing their voice. Too often the foster care system imposes decisions and services upon foster youth without acknowledging their opinions and voice (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012). In addition, young people frequently are not included in decisions that concern them most (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon, 2007) so when youth voice is incorporated into processes that impact them, they report an increase in self-confidence, feeling more positive about relationships with adults, and an increased sense of belonging (Havlicek, Lin, & Braun, 2016; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). Asking students with a background in foster care to evaluate the services targeted to support them is a critical step in furthering our understanding of what supports actually benefit these students and promoting the self-efficacy of this population.

This survey identified areas within the program that may not be accomplishing their intended purpose, even though student input and feedback was a key component of developing the program. For example, in theory, the coaching interaction was designed to increase students' familiarity with assessing strengths and struggles across 7 life domains, even when troubleshooting a problem in the educational or academic arena. Yet, the survey findings showed that in practice students were unable to name all seven life domain areas, and this was true regardless of their length of exposure to the coaching intervention. This finding raises questions about how the coaching model is both practiced by coaches and received by students. Another area receiving varied and relatively lower average importance rankings involves a summer orientation week and a first-year seminar class, two programs that are intended to help participants make the transition to college by becoming familiar with the college setting and addressing academic skills needed to succeed in college level courses. Participants

ranked both of these programs as only moderately important. Both of these examples highlight how a satisfaction survey can identify programming areas that require further investigation. Student feedback gives program management the opportunity to determine whether the supports involved are actually essential to student success and if they are, or whether interventions are being delivered with fidelity and in a way that provide students with the appropriate level of support. Feedback from this survey will also provide a baseline for future surveys measuring program effectiveness from student perspective.

The tendency for students to give higher ratings to their coaches compared to the particular functions that their coaches perform carries an important implication for practice. It suggests that program development for this population must consider both task and relationship dimensions of staff-student interactions and intervention components when deciding “what works” to improve college graduation and career transition for students with foster care histories. The coaching model used in the present study is intentional about using the coach-student relationship as a platform to explore and experiment with interpersonal skills. Coaches use the predictable and consistent process of the 3-step coaching interaction to allow for a range of emotional reaction that is part-and-parcel of all relationships in the student's life. As the coach and student move through moments of celebration and periods of troubleshooting, the student gathers new relationship experiences that can be generalized and applied to other people in their lives. For example, if a student habitually responds to constructive feedback by withdrawing or cutting-off any further communication, the coach is able to re-engage the student on other program or school-related matters and explore other skills to aid students in building a repertoire of responses when receiving criticism, or praise for that matter. Other intervention ideas generated from college students with foster care histories (e.g., Salazar, Jones, Emerson, & Mucha, 2016b) may want to incorporate student-staff relationship measures, as well as intervention and outcome measures when evaluating the model in practice.

5. Summary

The challenge of supporting young adults who have aged out of

foster care is a relatively new phenomenon made possible by policy changes in the early 2000s. With the availability of federal and state funding, youth from foster care are enrolling in institutions of higher education in growing numbers. More colleges are recognizing the need to provide these students with targeted support services and established campus programs provide varying degrees of financial, academic, and other support services. Researchers have stressed the importance of clearly articulated and evidence-based support programs and assessments of the impact of these support programs on graduation rates for college students with a background in foster care. This exploratory study provides descriptive information about one campus-based program that received high marks by student users for the majority of the program supports. The program also reports promising outcomes with graduation rates exceeding rates of students from foster care reported in previous research studies. Further research is needed to understand what factors are contributing to successful graduation, as well as the large number of students from foster care dropping out of college in spite of having research-based supports targeted to address their most critical needs. A detailed analysis of the reasons that participants temporarily or completely stop in their pursuit of a college degree will expand our understanding of factors that are contributing to these lower graduation rates. This information will enable college support programs to move a step closer in understanding the most effective ways to support students from foster care in earning a college degree.

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Appendix A. Key program components of the Seita Scholars program

Financial and housing support	Brief key program component description
Tuition scholarship	Students accepted into the program receive a tuition scholarship each semester of enrollment. Receipt of the scholarship is contingent upon signing an initial agreement that stipulates the conditions of the scholarship, which include living on campus and performing academically.
Housing during fall and spring semesters	Students accepted into the program are guaranteed on-campus housing, which is paid for by each student with funds from their individual financial aid packages.
Housing during semester breaks	Students living in residence halls who do not have safe housing options during semester breaks are hosted by the university in one designated dorm. The program pays for this additional housing during the semester breaks, organizes one meal per day and offers some social activities.
Help with financial aid	Few students when they enter college understand how to access various sources of financial aid. Coaches help students to access financial aid support to identify and access these resources including Pell Grants, Educational Training Voucher funds, other state funds, work-study and other scholarships.
Financial incentives for academic performance	Academic incentives reward students who have achieved academic success in one of three areas: by increasing their semester GPA by one point; by earning between a 3.0 and 3.49 semester GPA; and earning Dean's List status of 3.5 GPA or better.
Paid internships	Funding is provided to students who meet the GPA requirement, have obtained an unpaid internship that is associated with their major, and will earn the student college credits toward graduation.
Funds for professional attire	Funds for professional attire are made available for students who participate on the program's speakers' bureau. These students attend and present at conferences, meetings, and various related activities across the State.
Earning scholarship for study abroad	Scholarships up to \$2000 to cover costs to study abroad are available on a first come, first serve basis. Coaches assist students with the application process for study abroad opportunities.
Coaching support	

7 life domains	The 7 life domains provide the framework for coaching interactions between a coach and student and include: education, employment and finances, housing, physical and mental health, social relationships and community connections, personal and cultural identity, and life skills.
Campus Coach	Each student is assigned a full-time masters-level staff that is trained in the program's coaching model and communicates through the use of a 3-step coaching interaction. Coaching support is available to students 24 h per day, 365 days per year through a rotation of on-call coaches. Students communicate with coaches via text, phone, e-mail and in person. Over the course of 4 to 6 years of undergraduate studies, a student will have experienced hundreds of coaching interactions.
3-step coaching interaction	
Assess need	Step 1 of 3 in the coaching interaction. The coach and student work together to identify strengths and struggles for the student in each of the seven life domains.
Prioritize need	Step 2 of 3 in the coaching interaction. The coach assists the student to identify priority needs given the students' assessment of strengths and struggles and current situation.
Teach (generalize to situations outside of the program)	Step 3 of 3 in the coaching interaction. The coach identifies with the student the focus of action for learning, which targets student growth in one of the three following areas: improving knowledge, developing skill or cultivating insight. When situations involve systemic obstacles, then action for learning may also focus on advocacy in which case the coach actively intervenes to promote system-level change.
Other coaching support	
State worker on campus	All students have access to a full-time Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) employee who is stationed on campus and embedded in the staff team; this university-state partnership makes the program a “one-stop shop” for all foster care and state business.
Career mentor	A volunteer career-mentoring service developed and managed within the program to assist students with building networks of supportive individuals during their time as college students and as they transition into the workplace. The program links students to professionals who agree to volunteer by engaging mentees in a variety of activities such as job shadowing, networking, information sharing, and discussion about career paths and plans.
Benchmark goals	A mandatory program activity in which each student uses a “Benchmark Worksheet” to develop annual goals for each of the seven life domains. The benchmark goals are reviewed with the Campus Coach.
Graduation plan	A mandatory program activity in which each student maps out a graduation plan during his/her first semester of college for students who have decided on a major and the beginning of their second year for students who have not decided on a major. Campus Coaches review this plan with students and then students complete the plan with their academic advisor. The plan is updated as needed.
Budgeting support	An optional program activity in which students meet with a volunteer accountant that aids students in developing a budget. Every first year student is required to complete a semester budget as well as when students prepare to graduate and transition into career. Students may also meet with the volunteer any time in between as needed.
Identity groups	An optional program activity in which students join themed groups designed to support identity development as male, female or LGBTQ. A fourth group focuses on identity development for students who are parents or parenting. All group participants are students from foster care.
Finding a tutor	An optional activity in which students are assisted in securing tutoring services generally available on campus.
Part-time work	An optional activity in which students are assisted in finding part-time employment on campus or in the community. In most instances, the employment is supported by Federal Work Study.
Academic support	
Summer orientation	A mandatory program activity brings students to campus for one week in the summer prior to the start of their first year at the university. This bridging program is designed and led by student peers and aims to increase students' familiarity with program staff and campus supports, as well as begin academic support planning prior the start of the school year.
First year seminar	A mandatory university course for all first-year students designed to increase academic success. The program has two sections that are exclusive to students from foster care and are taught by Campus Coaches with assistance from student peers.

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