

A Qualitative Descriptive of Best Practices Utilized by Foster Youth Support Program Staff at Community Colleges in California

Danisha Keating

DK Education Consulting, California, USA

Email: Danisha.keating@gmail.com

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Open Access

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how foster care support program staff describe best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences for foster care youth who matriculated into community colleges. For this study, the theoretical framework was ecological system by Urie Bronfenbrenner. This theory was used as a lens to understand how these support programs impacted foster youth students' ability to stay in school to complete their degree and how support services impact their academic success by removing barriers financially, emotionally, and academically. The research questions that guided the study were: How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in financial interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges? How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in emotional interventions that support the retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges? And, how do foster care support program staff describe best practices in academic interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges? The sample for this study was foster youth support staff who worked in California community colleges.

Keywords

Foster Youth Support Programs, Community Colleges, Foster Youth Support, Best Practices for Foster Youth Support Programs

1. Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how foster care

support programs staff describe best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences for foster care youth who matriculated into community colleges. This study aimed to fill the gap in literature by understanding the characteristics and challenges of foster care support programs within the community colleges and how the foster care support programs assist foster youth students emotionally, financially, and academically (Geiger et al., 2018; Miller, Benner et al., 2019; Okpych & Courtney, 2020). This study looked at the program services offered to foster youth students and how the foster care support program staff described best practices in assisting foster youth students who matriculated into community colleges within California. The support staff included counselors, program directors, academic counselors, and advisors in California community colleges. The research questions that guided the study were: How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in financial interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges? How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in emotional interventions that support the retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges? And, how do foster care support program staff describe best practices in academic interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges? The sample for this study was foster youth support staff who worked in California community colleges counselors, program directors, academic counselors, and advisors in California community colleges, which included counselors, program directors, academic counselors, and advisors in California community colleges. It was not known how foster care support program staff in community colleges describe best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences of foster care youth who have matriculated into community colleges.

2. Background of the Study

2.1. Barriers of Foster Youth Students within Community Colleges

Foster youth students are more likely to enroll in community colleges after completion of high school, thus focusing on enhancing the support program offerings, and allocating more funding towards community colleges is needed compared to universities (DeCoursey & McKlindon, 2020; Geiger et al., 2018). This section addresses the program barriers that community colleges face with lack of program financial support and lack of housing opportunities for community colleges and foster care youth. Due to the lack of funding for programs, foster youth students' financial needs go unmet, leaving foster youth students more likely to drop out of college (DeCoursey & McKlindon, 2020; Geiger et al., 2018).

A study by Geiger et al. (2018) found that 28% of community colleges in California had implemented a campus support program that was available for foster youth students, but roughly around 68% of all four-year universities in Califor-

nia had a campus support program for foster youth students (Okpych et al., 2020). Geiger et al. (2018) revealed that community colleges have implemented fewer foster care youth support programs compared to universities which may be related to the financial sustainability of the campus support programs' long-term existence. Financial support for the campus-based program is limited and often dependent on the individual university or college to provide the funding (Geiger et al., 2018; Okpych et al., 2020). Campus-based support programs for foster care youth are extremely important to the success of the foster youth students, but these support programs cannot survive without financial support. Immensely, literature concludes that most campus-based support programs know that guidance, emotional support, and stability are key components needed to accurately support foster care youth while they are in college (Johnson et al., 2020; Neal, 2017). Foster youth students are more likely to enroll in community colleges after completion of high school; thus, a focus is needed on enhancing the support program offerings and allocating more funding towards community colleges compared to universities (DeCoursey & McKlindon, 2020; Geiger et al., 2018).

Research shows that foster care youth in college experience a lack of emotional support (Atkinson, 2008), a lack of educational support and physical support (McNair et al., 2018), and a lack of financial support given that the financial aid provided is not enough (Okpych & Courtney, 2020). For foster youth students who want to attend college and finish their degrees, more academic, emotional, and financial support is needed (Amechi, 2020; Atkinson, 2008; Dworsky, 2020). At the age of 18 years old, foster care youth lose all emotional, academic, and financial support, which increases the likelihood of a foster youth student being unable to complete their degrees or certification programs or dropping out of school (Atkinson, 2008; Hill & Peyton, 2017; Piel et al., 2020; Rassen et al., 2010).

2.2. Lack of Financial Support and Housing at Community Colleges

One difficulty that some community colleges endure in California, is that only 10 community college districts were approved financially to implement a campus-based support program (California College Pathways, 2018; Okpych et al., 2020). Out of the 73-community college districts, this still leaves 63-community college districts without financial funding to implement a campus-based support program for foster youth students (California College Pathways, 2018; Okpych et al., 2020). Another difficulty for campus-based support programs is that there is not a universal model for support program implementation, so if a college develops a support program, they are building it financially and physically from the ground up for every individual campus (Geiger et al., 2016; Piel et al., 2020). Without proper funding, this impacts the types of services that the campus-based support program can offer to the foster youth students.

Although the campus-based support program can assist foster youth students with unique needs within the college, it is highly recommended that these programs are able to be tailored to the individual student's need so that students are

getting the assistance that would be the most effective for them (Tordön et al., 2020). Without systematic financial support, the support program is unable to tailoring its services to student's individual needs. This means that it is nearly impossible for community colleges to foster care support programs to fill every need of the student (Tordön et al., 2020). A study by Schelbe et al. (2019) indicated that there is a need for more research into the effectiveness of the campus-based support programs. Campus programs are different and may vary in how they help students, types of support given, and standards for programs to function properly. Foster care support program staff is minimal between some campus-based support programs, which means collecting data from multiple support programs to evaluate its effectiveness may be scarce.

A sizable percentage, 57%, of foster care youth experience homeless within six months of aging out of the system (Narendorf et al., 2020). While 36% of foster care youth have been homeless at least once by 26-year-old, compared to only 4% of non-foster care youth ages 18 - 26 who have experienced homelessness at least once (Dworsky et al., 2013). Although four-year university campus-based programs offer some financial scholarships and continuous housing and life coaching through their program, most two-year community colleges do not have onsite housing for foster youth students to utilize (Okpych et al., 2020). This leaves foster care youth in community colleges obligated to find housing for the entire year without any campus-based support assistance for housing.

2.3. Higher Attrition among Foster Youth Students

Foster care youth are more likely to withdraw from college compared to their peers due to the lack of social, emotional, and financial support from their biological family (Courtney et al., 2011; Johnson, 2019; Kinarsky, 2017; Sim et al., 2008). Around 32% to 45% of foster care youth enrolled in a college (Abdul-Alim, 2019), but 21% of foster care youth had dropped out of college in their first year of attending (Tobolowsky et al., 2019), while another 34% left before earning a degree (Day et al., 2012; Tobolowsky et al., 2019). The statistics of foster youth students dropping out of college before earning a degree is extremely high due to the lack of financial, emotional, and academic support. However, those who were able to complete a degree were able to find success in their lives. 5% of foster care youth reported earning a vocational or license/certificate, 3% reported earning an associate degree or higher (National Youth in Transition Database, 2016; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Schoos, 2018; Wolanin, 2005), while National Foster Youth Institute (2017) states that less than 3% of foster care youth are likely to earn a degree in their life. Nationally, degree completion among foster care youth is statistically low and varies by each state.

2.4. Foster Youth Support Program Implementation at Community Colleges

Programs and Eligibility are Vastly Different

Support program expectations are determined by individual campuses. Foster care support program staff, administrators and districts determine the needs for support programs and for foster youth students who are enrolled in the college. Some of the major needs for foster care youth are financial, educational support, and guidance (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger & Gross, 2019; Gross & Geiger, 2019; Henderson et al., 2013). Piel et al. (2020) suggested that support programs should have liaisons that reach out to foster youth students to help guide them through their college experience and connect them to different departments or campus resources. However, it is not known how community college foster care support program staff describe best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences of foster care youth who have matriculated into community colleges. Some of the expectations for community college support programs are to provide support for students academically, financially, and emotionally. However, according to Hogan (2020), not all students will receive support from the campus-based support programs due to eligibility criteria that vary across support programs.

2.5. Foster Youth Must Self-Identify as Foster Youth

There is a significant disconnect from high school to college reporting due to lack of a connection with the child welfare office, lack of communication from students self-identifying that they were previously in foster care, and foster care youth unawareness that there are support programs available at the college (Piel et al., 2020; Trejos-Castillo & Noriega, 2020). The inability to have a database that shares this information with the support program automatically, and the need for students to self-select to share information, leaves students unserved. Referrals to the program and screening are also requirements before students can use the resources provided by the campus-based support program (Okpych et al., 2020). It is possible that without self-identifying or a referral, foster youth students would never utilize the campus-based support program while attending the college.

2.6. Lack of Understanding How the Support Programs Staff Described Best Practices

Gap in Literature:

Foster youth students are more likely to enroll in community colleges after graduating from high school, but minimal research has focused on enhancing support program offerings or understanding how foster care support program staff at community colleges describe best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences of foster care youth who have matriculated into community colleges (Geiger et al., 2018; Miller, Benner et al., 2019; Okpych & Courtney, 2020; Piel et al., 2020). Before this study was conducted, it was not known how community college foster care support program staff described best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences of foster

care youth who have matriculated into community colleges in California.

Community College enrollment of foster youth students:

California College Pathways (2018) revealed that only 8022 foster youth students graduated community colleges with certificates or associate degrees, or transferred to universities, which means that 160,000 foster youth students who have aged out of the foster care system. Based on the number, only 21% of California's foster care youth attended college, and only 0.05% of California's foster care youth graduated with a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degrees.

3. Research Questions

RQ1: How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in financial interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges?

RQ2: How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in emotional interventions that support the retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges?

RQ3: How do foster care support program staff describe best practices in academic interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges?

4. Method

4.1. Sample Description

Out of 250 contacts, 80 were returned as undeliverable or no longer active. 30 individuals completed the questionnaire, indicating a 12% response rate. To obtain a variety of perspectives, multiple individuals with different titles that worked at various community colleges, were invited to participate in the questionnaire. Of the 30 participants, 19 participants self-selected to volunteer in the interview. To ensure confidentiality, participants were not asked what community college they worked for, their program name or their last name. The last question on the questionnaire asked if the individual would like to self-select for a voluntary interview, if the participant selected yes, they were asked for their phone number and email.

4.2. Methodology and Design

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methods fit this study best given this study explored how foster care support program staff describe best practices for serving the foster care youth at community colleges. This study revealed how support staff describe best practices that reduced attrition and increased retention and graduation rates among foster youth students. Qualitative methods focus on understanding specific variables within a context such as perceived situations and focusing on a smaller sample population (Bengtsson, 2016). Using a qualitative methodology allowed for understanding of an individual's belief system, perspectives, and experiences. For this study, it

looked at the perspective or first-hand experiences of the support staff who work with foster youth students as they describe best practices working with foster youth students that matriculated into the community colleges.

5. Data Tools

5.1. Questionnaire

A total of 30 participants self-selected to participate in the open-ended questionnaire that answered questions on how foster youth support staff describe best practices in financial interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges.

5.2. Interview

A total of 19 participants self-selected to participate in an open-ended interview on how foster youth support program staff describe best practices in emotional interventions that support the retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges.

A total of 19 participants self-selected to participate in an open-ended interview on how foster youth support staff describe best practices in academic interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges.

6. Results

6.1. Participant Characteristics

One hundred percent of the participants were at a community college in California, and all participants worked within the foster youth support program for at least 1 year.

Thirty participants responded to the questionnaire and answered all of the open-ended questions.

Nineteen participants participated in the interviews and answered all of the open-ended questions.

All participants lived in California and worked with California community college foster youth support programs. All participants were over the age of 18 years old and had at least 1 year of experience working with foster youth students within a foster youth support program at a community college in California. The researcher did not use a demographic questionnaire because the scope of the study was not looking at foster youth support staff perception differences based on gender, age, years of experience or job titles (Frederick, 2021).

6.2. Study Results

Using a descriptive design allowed foster youth support staff to give their own first-person opinions, perspectives, and attitudes towards how the support program assists foster youth students without having to assess a hypothesis or make

predictions that were not connected to participants results (Rindu & Ariyanti, 2017). Data was garnered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. All data gathered in this study was arranged, readied, and analyzed to address the research questions from this study. There were six themes that emerged from the data that was collected, and these findings were applied to the three primary research questions. These six best practices are 1) collaboration among departments and community partners 2) financial intervention strategies such as community partner financial support and institutional financial support 3) consistent implementation of an open door policy 4) adaptable staff support and adjustable program eligibility, 5) removing compound barriers for students, such as the inability to pay for college, stress, anxiety, and failing classes, and lastly 6) staff/faculty training on trauma-informed methods and academic support.

Within this study, the researcher utilized the ecological systems theory, The compound barriers that influence the ecological systems of a foster youth student throughout their community college experience can be categorized into four key barriers: family support, financial support, emotional support, and academic support. Participants in this study stated that each barrier a foster youth student endures in college, negatively impacts other areas of their life, specifically their academic environment. The cycle matrix graph provides a visual representation of how each compound barrier foster youth students endure impacts each ecological system, which leads to a decrease in retention and increase in attrition of foster youth students in community colleges. The cycle matrix displays the following compound barriers 1) The mesosystem and microsystem, which is the lack of family support to the foster youth student in college impacting 2) the macrosystem, socioeconomic standing to pay for college, basic needs like housing and food, and school supplies, which impacts 3) the exosystem, which is the foster youth student's environment for learning, thus impacting 4) the chronosystems, which is foster youth's academic accomplishments in community college.

7. Discussions

In examining the results of this study, foster youth support staff provided insights on how foster care support program staff describe best practices of foster care support programs through the perspectives of the foster care support program staff. Since the phenomenon of interest in this qualitative study was how foster care support program staff described best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students at community colleges, the examination of these foster youth support program staff descriptions narrowed the existing gap in existing literature supported by Geiger et al. (2018), Piel et al. (2020), Miller, Benner et al. (2019), and Okpych and Courtney (2020). The overall data analysis procedure derived from two data sources, the questionnaires, and interviews,

that revealed best practices that were commonly used as interventions to support retention and success of foster care youth students within community colleges in California. These best practices are as followed:

7.1. Best Practices for Financial Interventions

7.1.1. Collaboration among Departments and Community Partners

Foster youth support staff stated that community partners provide resources for foster youth students and how, without the community partner support, the support program would be unable to meet students' needs ranging from laptops, school supplies, transitional housing, and donor grants to keep the program going. This theme is related to how foster youth support staff describe best practices for networking and building relationships with community resources that can financially support the program's mission to remove all barriers that decrease retention and success of foster care youth students in community college. In this study, all foster youth support staff participants stated that an enormous barrier for foster youth students in community college was lack of financial support. All foster youth support staff participants revealed that the biggest financial strain for foster youth students was due to inadequate housing, food insecurities, and having the inability to pay for their basic needs. All participants stated that collaboration among staff, faculty and community partners, was essential in helping provide foster youth students with the support they needed.

7.1.2. Financial Intervention Strategies Such as Community Partner Financial Support and Institutional Financial Support

Study participants described that foster youth students lack basic life skills, such as time management, lack of knowledge of resources available, and money management. Foster youth support program staff noted that while foster youth students may struggle to have financial support from family, the program's goal is to help educate foster youth students on the resources available to them and use those resources for educational purposes. 15 out of 19 foster youth support staff participants stated that financial literacy among foster youth students was minimal; it was important for foster youth support staff to provide workshops and conversations about proper utilization of the money foster youth would receive. Y1 stated, "Best practices is educating our students on money management by having those workshops and conversations." Further, participants agreed that it is essential to educate foster youth students on all available resources to them. These resources can be through the campus-based support program or community partner resources. All participants in this study stated that foster youth students enter the program with a false sense of what community college would be like and are unaware of the support available to them to help them academically, but also emotionally and financially.

Further, all participants described what the support program provided financial resources, but 18 out of 19 participants stated that financial support from the institution was limited and based on grants or donor support provided by or-

ganizations that have partnered with them to help foster youth students who attend community college.

7.2. Best Practices for Emotional Interventions

7.2.1. Implementation of an Open-Door Policy

Further, all participants described what the support program provided financial resources, but 18 out of 19 participants stated that financial support from the institution was limited and based on grants or donor support provided by organizations that have partnered with them to help foster youth students who attend community college. Foster youth support program participants included making sure foster youth students were given time to build trust with staff and faculty and allowed foster youth students to know that the foster youth support staff was there for them. One way that foster youth support staff described as a best practice was to show foster youth students how to write emails, use their voice, and properly handle a situation. The practice was another way to build trust among staff and foster youth students.

7.2.2. Adaptable Staff Support and Adjustable Program Eligibility

Foster youth support staff perception of emotionally meeting foster youth students where they are at was an emergent theme based on the responses of this study. Participants stated that it was important that foster youth support staff focused on the best practices of listening to foster youth students and reminding foster youth students of the resources available to them, actively listening to foster youth students, and helping them with resources. Although foster youth support staff stated that eligibility requirements for the resources may be a barrier for some students to gain access to, foster youth support staff understood that it was pertinent for foster youth support staff to keep up to date with resources that are available to students, remind foster youth students of the resources available to them and connect them to those resources.

7.3. Best Practices for Academic Interventions

7.3.1. Removing Barriers Like the Inability to Pay for College, Stress, Anxiety, and Failing Classes

Foster youth support program staff try to help remove obstacles that foster youth students face daily by removing any barrier that could decrease their ability to focus on their academic progress. Foster youth support staff acknowledged that many foster youth students revealed that the support program was their only support and encouragement to attend college. Foster youth support staff stated they felt it was their responsibility to remove all obstacles for foster youth students, to ensure that foster youth students could solely focus on their academics.

There were 14 out of 19 foster youth support staff that described foster youth students' barriers were intertwined. The lack of physical support impacted foster youth student's financial, emotional, and academic success at community col-

lege. The compound barriers that impact the ecological systems of a foster youth student throughout their community college experience can be categorized into four key barriers: family support, financial support, emotional support, and academic support. Participants in this study suggested that if a foster youth struggled in one area, they struggled academically, and it was staffs' duty to ensure the barriers they could remove for the foster youth student, were removed as soon as possible.

7.3.2. Staff and Faculty Training on Trauma-Informed Methods and Academic Support

Foster youth support program staff try to help remove obstacles that foster youth students face daily by improving collaboration efforts and relationships between departments, staff, and faculty to increase retention of foster youth students. This theme is related to how foster youth support staff describe best practices in academic interventions that support retention and success of foster care youth students who have matriculated into community colleges. During interviews, foster youth support staff stated that foster youth students endure obstacles academically. Among these obstacles was a lack of academic foundation for core subjects like Math and English, undiagnosed learning disabilities, and faculty class policies. There were 15 out of 19 support staff participants stated that some faculty worked hard with foster youth, while other faculty didn't feel being a foster youth student was an academic barrier. Participants in this study stated that professors who worked well with students were also trauma-informed from personal experience or had trauma-informed training. All participating foster youth support staff in this study stated the importance of trauma-informed counseling and an institution that supports the program physically and financially and increased the likelihood of serving foster youth students better.

7.4. Discussion Summary

These six best practices are: 1) collaboration among departments and community partners 2) financial intervention strategies such as community partner financial support and institutional financial support 3) consistent implementation of an open door policy 4) adaptable staff support and adjustable program eligibility, 5) removing compound barriers for such as the inability to pay for college, stress, anxiety, and failing classes, and lastly 6) staff/faculty training on trauma-informed methods and academic support. There were 14 out of 19 foster youth support staff that noted foster youth students' financial, emotional, and academic barriers negatively impact academic success. Utilizing the theory of ecological systems, this study added value to the theory by expanding understanding of how support programs have a long-term effect on the academic environment of foster youth students in college and how the campus-based support programs may be able to assist foster youth students successfully through community colleges (Geiger et al., 2018).

8. Future Research and Recommendations

According to foster youth support program staffs' perceptions, more research should be conducted on the Academic Pathways that are being adopted by 20 community colleges in California and how that impacts foster youth students that matriculate into community colleges. Academic Pathways is designed to keep a student on an academic path from beginning to end and ensures that the students graduate within a two-year timeframe. Still, it is not known how this academic pathway will impact the national graduation rate of 3% among foster youth students or graduation timeframe among foster youth students (California College Pathways, 2018).

Future research can also include a comprehensive description of foster youth students' perception of best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences of foster care youth at community colleges. The results of this study will benefit community colleges by providing recommendations for future practices and program needs. The recommendations for future practices are 1) future institutional budgeting, 2) implementation of a standard support program module that includes best practices from this study, 3) combining programs for foster youth students with one eligibility and lastly, 4) mandate institutional staff and faculty trauma-informed practices for working with foster youth students.

This study identified a future practice to realign institutional budgeting to include foster youth support programs underneath the department of Diversity and Equity's budget or budget the support program into the annual budget to ensure that the support program is not categorically funded after year. This qualitative descriptive study supports the need for community colleges to provide support to foster youth students who matriculated into community colleges.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how foster care support program staff described best practices to improve the financial, emotional, and academic experiences of foster care youth who matriculated into community colleges in California. A purposive sampling of 30 participants for the questionnaires and a subsample of 19 participants responded to the interviews. This study explored the phenomenon of foster youth support program staff best practices and can be shared with other foster youth support program staff to develop strategies to better assist foster youth students who matriculate into community colleges. Using a descriptive design allowed foster youth support staff to give their own first-person opinions, perspectives, and attitudes towards how the support program assists foster youth students without having to assess a hypothesis or make predictions that were not connected to participants' results (Rindu & Ariyanti, 2017). Data was garnered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. All data gathered in this study was arranged, readied, and analyzed to address the research questions from this study. There were

six themes that emerged from the data that was collected, and these findings were applied to the three primary research questions.

In this study, participants described their understanding of the barriers that foster youth students face while enrolled at community college. Foster youth support program staff who participated in the questionnaire and interviews provided their descriptions of how their best practices play an essential role in supporting foster youth students and how foster youth students retain financial, emotional, and academic information and support in community college. More importantly, the findings of this study indicated that educational institutions could financially and physically partner with the support programs to improve the financial, emotional, and academic support provided to foster youth students.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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