Post-Secondary Pathways: Young Adults Impacted by Foster Care and/or Homelessness Navigating Higher Education

Findings from the Project Education Impact
Post-Secondary Subcommittee Focus Groups
Purpose

Young adults who have experienced unaccompanied homelessness or foster care continue to have more challenges with educational access and fewer economic opportunities and worse outcomes than their non-impacted peers. The Post-Secondary Subcommittee of Project Education Impact is tasked with eliminating these inequitable experiences and outcomes. To better understand the post-secondary realities of individuals who are directly affected and to use this information to inform legislative recommendations, focus groups with young adults across Washington state were conducted.

Guiding Questions

> How do young adults who have been impacted by the foster care system and/or homelessness describe their experiences navigating post-secondary education?

> What are the needs and barriers these young adults experience while pursuing their education or training goals? What would they prioritize trying to change?

> How do young adults who have been impacted by the foster care system and/or homelessness describe the lives they envision for themselves? In what ways, if at all, does post-secondary education feature in these envisioned lives?

Findings

> Unmet or unstable basic needs, especially housing insecurity, impact young adults’ ability to learn and succeed in post-secondary education.

> Young adults’ experiences in post-secondary education are greatly influenced in particular ways by supportive, non-family adults.

> Young adults envision futures that involve meaningful work and stability that is achieved through a variety of post-secondary education pathways.

Project Education Impact

This research was conducted for Project Education Impact (PEI), a coalition of statewide agencies, non-profit organizations, and legislators formed to achieve educational equity for children and youth experiencing homelessness or foster care from birth through post-secondary education by 2027.

PEI aspires to build and sustain coordinated systems to support these students and makes policy, practice and funding recommendations to address barriers to educational equity. In 2022, the workgroup identified the need for longitudinal and real-time data in post-secondary programs and engaged with young adults with lived experience to meet their own definitions of success.

The focus group findings in this report assist in informing PEI’s recommendations. Centering the voices and perspectives of people with lived experience in policy recommendations is necessary in working towards educational equity.
Engaging Participants

Prioritizing Lived Experience

Centering the voices and perspectives of people with lived experience in policy recommendations is an essential component of working towards educational equity. It was important to engage a group of young people in order to understand their perspectives as individuals who are most impacted by post-secondary systems and to accurately assess what changes need to happen.

The focus groups were facilitated by social service providers in addition to two lived experts who participated in three of the six focus groups. In each meeting, six standardized questions were asked, with deviation for follow-up and clarification questions.

To validate and refine the findings of the focus groups, the lived experts were consulted, and follow-up sessions were conducted to share back and seek feedback on these findings from participants.

Demographics of Focus Group Participants

Of the 26 young adults who participated, 18 shared their demographic information, which is displayed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaccompanied Homelessness</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care and Unaccompanied Homelessness</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Currently attending college/university</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed high school/GED only</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduated college/university/trade school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed some college</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50% Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>44% Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>6% Non-binary</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino/Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black/African American/African</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
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<td>25</td>
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</tr>
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26 Young adult participants with lived experience
6 Virtual focus group sessions
Lived experts & social service providers as facilitators
The Impact of Unmet Needs

To successfully pursue post-secondary education and goals, young adults who have experienced foster care and/or homelessness need support in accessing basic needs which for non-impacted peers are typically provided through familial resources. While certain programs help this population meet basic needs some of the time, young adults across all focus groups repeatedly described situations in which insecure access to housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and mental health services led to stress, low performance, and an overall ‘survival’ mentality.

Poverty-related survival mode has been found to negatively impact cognitive functioning and school achievement1 and participants’ responses described how survival mode limited their capacity for envisioning healthy, stable, and fulfilling futures. Housing was the most identified urgent concern which greatly destabilized young adults’ lives and educational journeys. Housing insecurity represented a key factor in perpetuating a survival mentality which contributes to low achievement, a reality clearly articulated by participants.

“The challenge is that if I am so concerned about my housing, if I’m so concerned about my money, that is going to inhibit me from being successful because that’s all the decisions that I’m making are based off of.”

“We’re in survival mode...and homeless mode and constantly fighting just to live for basic necessities, when we could be doing so much more.”

Housing During Post-Secondary Education

For young adults attending large universities, dorms provided some alleviation from housing instability, but participants also described on-campus and nearby housing as inaccessible due to unaffordability, rental regulations, and unpredictability. For peers who have not experienced foster care or homelessness, housing transitions during post-secondary education are supported through familial relationships and resources, but participants in the focus groups experienced these transitions without such assistance.

For young adults impacted by homelessness, decisions around housing are particularly challenging given the requirements of support programs such as Passport, which do not allow young adults to take a significant break from school without losing their funding or being asked to recertify as homeless. For a population already at heightened risk for adverse outcomes in adulthood2, housing stability and access to basic needs represents a substantial component of their post-secondary education success and long-term wellbeing.
Relationships are Key

“We've never been given that help that we're so desperately craving and now that we're in a position where it's now or never, we really need the support or we're not going to finish and it's hard because while other people have parents and grandparents to help them, we really are fending for ourselves.”

“I understand that there's going to be job turnover everywhere, but by contracting third party services you are hindering [staff] who would stay ... and start helping a student and then be there when they graduate.”

“There's not enough people who can tell you how to take care of yourself... because I didn't have parents teach me how to do it. And yeah, I just feel like the biggest challenge of being a college student is that...yes, I'm an adult, but I'm so lost. I still don't know what I'm doing. I still need help.”

Young adults’ success during and beyond post-secondary education is greatly impacted by their relationships with supportive, non-family adults. Participants highlighted the important roles played by program staff, career and academic counselors, mental health professionals, and educators. Non-family adults represented a significant need and source of support for young adults and a lack of access to this valuable resource can have dire consequences. Participants made clear the urgency of having adequate support at the right time.

Participants also highlighted the limitations of receiving support from paid staff who must work with the constraints of their institutions, including:

> Staff turnover, high caseloads, and lack of training can lead to inconsistent and even harmful dynamics between young adults and adult agents

> Young adults experience inconsistent support as they transition in and out of various institutions

> When staff experience high caseloads, it impacts the connections with young adults, meaning young adults may not reach out during times of need

> Programs providing this level of support are concentrated in colleges and not alternative pathways

Participants repeatedly expressed frustration with the “cookie cutter” aspects of the post-secondary education system which assumes all students are supported by parents and have access to basic resources like housing. For this population, supportive, non-family adults were needed to provide tailored supports to successfully navigate complicated systems and institutions that continue to marginalize nondominant students.
Relationship Impact

For young adults exploring post-secondary pathways, three broad areas of relational support are essential:

1. Non-family adults can provide access and connections to resources and relationships that young adults otherwise might have never been aware of. Supportive adults connected young adults to other programs and departments on and off campus, creating essential networks and access to the social capital that these populations may not be able to acquire otherwise through familial connections.

   “The staff put you in touch with people and help you make that social network that you didn’t previously have. That’s the kind of stuff that generally you might be more well connected if you have parents who are vouching for you.”

2. Young adults highlighted the non-academic navigational roles played by non-family adults who supported their transition into adulthood by assisting with tax preparation, scheduling and attending doctor appointments, communicating with insurance companies, applying for rental subsidies, navigating toxic workplaces, and other essential domains of adulthood. Connected to this was the idea that supportive adults teach young adults how to advocate for one’s needs or boundaries.

   “There’s so many times in college that I was too afraid to say something ... and I suffered through it because I didn’t think there was options and then [staff] would be like, ‘hold on, hold on, go back. You can fight that.’”

3. Young adults expressed the importance of emotional support provided by non-family adults, especially during the difficult transition into and during post-secondary education. Emotional support came formally through campus counselling centers but more often informally from program staff, which young adults appreciated while also noting the capacity limitations of these staff members.

   “I’ve been through hell and back, but college is a very lonely place, especially when you don’t have resources. And I think ... human connection is very much necessary, even if it’s just a person that can check in on you once a month.”
Personally-Defined Success

Young adults envision futures in which they can define success on their own terms and engage in meaningful work that involves helping their communities and loved ones.

> Participants repeatedly expressed a desire to make their own decisions about the future and to explore pathways rooted in their values and interests.

> Even for participants currently on a more traditional post-secondary pathway, there was an acknowledgement that success should not be limited to college. Young adults maintained that alternative pathways should be destigmatized, funded, and advertised early on in education.

In contrast to participants’ openness to alternative pathways, several young adults described support staff whose definitions for young adults’ success were limited to university pathways. Young adults described being pressured to attend college and steered away from alternative options.

Despite these experiences, participants made clear that post-secondary success should be broadly defined beyond traditional university pathways, and ultimately should be driven by young adults’ values and interests.

“I want to go into plumbing, being able to work on my own home and then helping family and friends with skills that actually are needed, not just a paycheck. Similarly, I wanted to have a purpose, have a career that I can look forward to going to.”

“You don’t have to go to a four-year school to feel successful to actually even go out there and make money.”

“From high school, we should be promoting much more jobs than college jobs. You know, all the school counselors advocate against the trades ... they will often say ‘go to college, you need to go to college, what college you want to go?’ ... there’s plenty of other opportunities and I think that everybody does have different strengths.”

“I want to find something that I am truly interested in and enjoy doing and I think, for me personally, that’s going to be something along the lines of advocating for foster youth.”
Looking Forward
Implications for Research & Practice

These findings have implications for future research as well as for the policies and practices related to the post-secondary success of young adults impacted by foster care or unaccompanied homelessness:

> For researchers, future work is needed to better understand the experiences of young adults who have not pursued post-secondary pathways or who enrolled but did not complete a degree, credential, or certificate. A recent study in Illinois reports that for foster youth who enrolled in community colleges, only 8% graduated with a certificate or degree. Future research should examine why young adults do not complete and to examine the population of young adults who never enroll to begin with.

> Additionally, future research should address the racial disparities embedded in the child welfare system by examining how racialization influences students' experiences and success. In this study, participant racial demographics reflect broader trends in the child welfare system in which families and youth of color are disproportionately represented. Additional research should explore how race and racism influence post-secondary pathways for young adults of color.

This report does not offer in-depth recommendations for policy or practice. However, the findings presented here suggest several important implications:

Post-secondary systems must account for the diverse needs and barriers this population experiences, including access to stable housing and supportive relationships as well as the structural barriers students face navigating institutions that are ill-equipped to support those who are unhoused or unconnected to kinship systems.

The findings suggest a need for practitioners and policymakers to re-examine what “counts” as post-secondary success and to seriously consider whether and how education and training systems honor young adults’ agency in defining and pursuing their own visions of success.

More attention must be given to the paid, nonfamily adults who assist this group of students. Questions for policymakers to consider include:

> How are institutional constraints impacting the support nonfamily adults can/cannot provide?
> Do staff receive adequate training and are their workloads reasonable for supporting a high-need population?
> To what extent do the identities and experiences of staff align with those of young adults who’ve experienced foster care or homelessness? Historically marginalized students struggle to feel a sense of belonging in higher education and nonfamily adults who reflect students' identities, cultures, and backgrounds may be able to better support young adults’ inclusion in higher education.
References


Limitations

This analysis is subject to limitations. First, demographic data were collected for only 18 of the 26 participants and because these data were anonymized, we cannot make claims about how identity might have impacted participant’s experiences. Additionally, for the 18 participants who did submit a demographic survey, there was an over-representation (78%) of young adults enrolled in or graduates of university/college. Many of these young adults were also enrolled in the Passport Program. These factors skew the data toward those who are receiving some form of benefit and have successfully entered the university/college systems. Future research should address these limitations by standardizing the collection of demographic data and by recruiting a participant sample that includes more young adults who have not entered post-secondary education and have not accessed resources such as the Passport programs.

Acknowledgements

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