



Summary

Foster care alumni enrolled in vocational and certificate programs experience greater barriers to completion than those who are enrolled in traditional college programs. The needs of this population were made particularly clear during the instability of the pandemic, as foster care alumni in vocational and certificate programs left school at higher rates than those in traditional college programs. Financial investments must be made to support vocational and certificate programs and the foster care alumni enrolled in these programs. Specifically, students in these programs need increased funding for financial assistance for school, comprehensive, wraparound student support services, and financial support with technology. Additionally, some foster care alumni in vocational and certificate programs are disproportionately impacted. Particular support should be directed to those living off-campus, parents, and those who identify as Black or African American.

Research Overview

To provide support and understand this phenomenon better, Think of Us developed a microgrant program for foster care alumni facing economic challenges during the pandemic. Cross sectional data was collected over a three-week period in November 2020. 27,000 applicants between the ages of 18 and 29 applied, representing all 50 States. We analyzed data from the 7,718 foster care alumni who applied for the grant that reported they were enrolled in college as of March 2020, right before the pandemic hit. The survey asked foster care alumni questions regarding their demographic information, their educational status, and their needs. The majority of respondents identified as female (65.3%) and male (25.6%). Regarding race and ethnicity, participants primarily identified as Black or African American (34.5%), Hispanic (22.8%), and White (19.5%).

Students answered questions regarding their educational status. The significant findings related to vocational programs are summarized below:

- Students in vocational programs (36.9%) left school at higher rates during the pandemic than those in traditional college programs (18.9%).
- Those enrolled in vocational programs were more likely to identify as Black or African American (45.5%) than those in traditional college programs (33.2%).
- Students who identified as Black or African American (38.6%) left vocational programs at higher rates than those who expressed other racial identities (35.4%).
- Those enrolled in vocational programs were more likely to live off-campus (97.7%) than those in traditional college programs (85.1%).
- Students who live off-campus (37.0%) left vocational programs at higher rates than those who live on-campus (31.6%).



- Students who are parents (42.9%) left vocational programs at higher rates than those who are not parents (36.8%).
- When asked about their greatest educational need, students enrolled in vocational programs primarily requested financial assistance (14.2%), assistance with acquiring reliable technology and internet services (12.8%), and academic assistance (7.1%).

Background

In March 2020, the COVID 19 pandemic caused higher education to enter emergency distance learning. Many governments responded by ordering institutions of higher education to cease face-to-face instruction for most of their students, requiring them to switch, almost overnight, to online teaching and virtual education. Although the pandemic disrupted educational pathways for all students, foster care alumni experienced the biggest setbacks. The term “foster care alumni” refers to those over the age of 18 who previously had experience in the foster care system. Foster care alumni often face numerous challenges that make the transition to adulthood more difficult in comparison to their peers. Unlike other college-going populations, foster youth have fewer support networks or safety nets to turn to in a time of crisis. The sudden closing of college campuses created a lot of uncertainty and emotional stress. Additionally, foster care alumni may have fewer financial resources and receive less financial support than their peers.¹ Placement changes throughout their childhood and adolescence may have resulted in school and educational disruption, which could result in a lack of academic preparation for college.² Foster care alumni may have a history of maltreatment, which can impact their mental and physical health.³ These factors (among others) can make the achievement of postsecondary education unattainable for many foster care alumni. In fact, foster care alumni enrolled in college describe challenges in securing housing, financial insecurity, and low levels of academic preparation.^{4,5} While foster care alumni graduate high school at similar rates to their peers, they report higher levels of GED completion and lower levels of college completion than those who do not have foster care history.⁶ Foster

¹ Salazar, A. M. (2013). The Value of a College Degree for Foster Care Alumni: Comparisons with General Population Samples. *Social Work*, 58(2), 139–150. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swt014>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Hernandez, L., & Naccarato, T. (2010). Scholarships and supports available to foster care alumni: A study of 12 programs across the US. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(5), 758–766. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.01.014>

⁵ Geiger, J. M., Piel, M. H., Day, A., & Schelbe, L. (2018). A descriptive analysis of programs serving foster care alumni in higher education: Challenges and opportunities. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 85, 287–294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.01.001>

⁶ Pecora, P. J., Williams, J., Kessler, R. C., Hiripi, E., O'Brien, K., Emerson, J., Herrick, M. A., & Torres, D. (2006). Assessing the educational achievements of adults who were formerly placed in family foster care. *Child & Family Social Work*, 11(3), 220–231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00429.x>



care alumni report disproportionately lower income levels, lower levels of employment, and higher use of public services than their peers.¹

Vocational, technical, and trade programs⁷ provide avenues for those transitioning to adulthood, particularly foster care alumni. These programs generally involve long-term certificate and associate degrees and are geared towards a particular career. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, vocational training can be categorized into one of the following: general job preparedness, consumer education, and training/experiential opportunities designed for a particular career.⁸ Vocational programs train students for employment in various careers including (but not limited to) dental hygienists, construction managers, electricians, computer technicians, mechanics, and chefs. An advantage of these programs is that they often result in competitive salaries, with lower financial and time investments than the traditional four-year college option. The department of education reports that students who enrolled in career and technical education courses reported higher median incomes and were more likely to be employed eight years after graduation than their peers who did not enroll in these courses.⁹ The median salary¹⁰ in frequently chosen occupations are shown below.

Occupation	Median salary
Electrical repair	\$80,000 or more
Court reporter	\$60,000-\$79,999
Aircraft mechanics and service technicians	\$60,000-\$79,999
HVAC installer	\$40,000 to \$59,999
Automotive technicians and mechanics	\$40,000 to \$59,999
Dental assistant	\$40,000 to \$59,999
Hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists	less than \$30,000

Given that vocational programs tend to be shorter in time, less expensive, and more geared towards a particular career than a two or four-year college program, they may be particularly useful to foster care alumni. However, while research does indicate that students enrolled in vocational programs report lower income levels than their peers enrolled in full or part-time college programs¹¹, governmental

⁷ These terms are often used interchangeably along with other terms such as “career technical education” or “CTE”. For the sake of consistency, this paper refers to all of these programs as vocational programs.

⁸ Vocational Education in the US. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/95024-2.asp>

⁹ CTE data story: Insights into how CTE can improve students’ income after they graduate. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/cte/index.html>

¹⁰ Occupation Finder: Occupational Outlook Handbook : U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/occupation-finder.htm>

¹¹ Jenkins, D., & Weiss, M. J. (n.d.). Charting Pathways to Completion for Low-Income Community College Students. 49.



funding for higher education (including vocational programs) decreased over the past decade.¹² The decreased funding reduces vocational programs' ability to provide academic and financial support to their students.

Over the past year, the global pandemic presented numerous difficulties for students.¹³ Those who were attending secondary education were primarily impacted by the closure of dorms, increased financial insecurity and increased isolation. Given that foster care alumni already experienced many barriers to completing higher education prior to the pandemic, a need exists to study foster care alumni's educational experience over the past year in order to determine what additional supports may be necessary. Furthermore, since those in vocational programs may also be vulnerable to these same factors, it is needed to study the impact of the pandemic on foster care alumni in vocational programs.

Policy recommendations

The results from this survey reinforce findings from the literature that foster care alumni, particularly those in vocational programs, are at risk during economic instability. In order to address the barriers that foster care alumni in vocational programs face, we recommend the following:

- **Provide adequate financial aid supports.** In the absence of substantial financial assistance, foster care alumni enrolled in vocational education programs may decide to forgo their educational plans and enter the workforce. This financial assistance should cover tuition and fees as well as their daily living expenses, such as housing and childcare. It should also consist primarily of grants rather than loans as to not burden foster youth with student debt. Moreover, because certain sources of financial aid may be easier to access while students are still in care (independent living stipends, education training vouchers), foster care alumni should be encouraged to stay in foster care for as long as possible.
- **Develop and implement targeted, wraparound student support programs on vocational education campuses.** Financial support alone does not solve the retention issue with our population. Financial aid must be matched with targeted wraparound supports to maximize the success of students in foster care in meeting their educational goals. Specific student support elements include advising/case management, mentoring, academic support, and fostering community and career connections. Campus support programs have played a large part in supporting the stability of foster youth enrolled in traditional 2- and 4-year colleges. Similar infrastructure is needed in vocational education settings.
- **Increase funding for technology adoption and support for foster care alumni in vocational programs.** Financial support should specifically address the high expenses associated with

¹² State Higher Education Funding Cuts Have Pushed Costs to Students, Worsened Inequality. (n.d.). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-higher-education-funding-cuts-have-pushed-costs-to-students>

¹³ Son C, Hegde S, Smith A, Wang X, Sasangohar F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study. *J Med Internet Res*, 22(9). DOI: 10.2196/21279



technology that is necessary for full academic participation. Students should have access to a reliable computer, adequate internet access, and other technology that might be necessary for a particular technical program. Assistance in this area should come in the form of grants or financial support for loaner programs at each vocational school. Along with assistance in obtaining necessary technology, students should also be provided technical support to aid with fixing technical issues and learning software that might otherwise be a barrier to educational access. This can be achieved by integrating campus IT departmental support into wider campus support programs.

- **Increase funding for housing support for foster care alumni in vocational programs.** Safe, stable, and affordable housing is essential if foster care alumni are able to pursue post-secondary education. The consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 waives the 30% limitation states can draw down to support older youth with housing under the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act. Using these resources to increase the capacity of vocational education institutions to offer campus-based or campus adjacent housing where students can live year-round can substantially increase their ability to attend school. Additionally, these COVID resources could also be used to provide housing subsidies through Housing Choice Voucher Program for off-campus housing.
- **Provide access to high quality childcare and parental support programs for foster care alumni enrolled in vocational programs.** Vocational institutions can develop relationships with campus adjacent childcare centers whereby a number of those slots could be set aside for young parents enrolled in vocational education that have experienced foster care.
- **Promote targeted hiring practices to ensure a diverse workforce in the student support services,** including recruitment of paid personnel and volunteers that can serve as mentors so that students of color have access to role models that that can support the development of their cultural and personal identities.