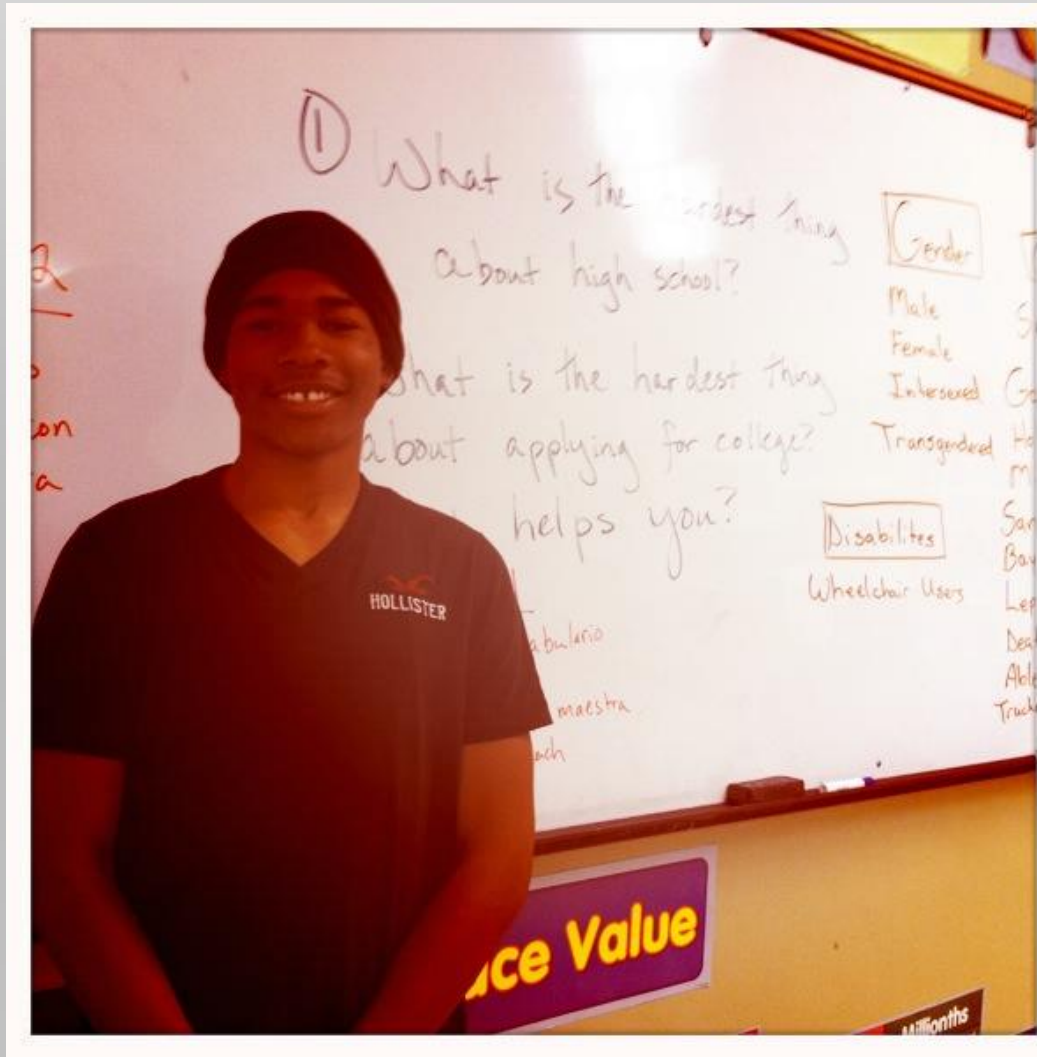


Building Bridges: Effective Program Services Intended to Support Former Foster Youth in Community College

An
Evaluation of
Programs
Aimed to
Support
Former
Foster Youth
in
Community
Colleges

Adrianna
Hutchinson



Dedication

This report is dedicated to any persons who ever felt like they didn't have a voice to explain why their circumstances weren't the product of their integrity or self-worth. You are not worth what happens to you, but rather what you do with it. Especially to you, my hummingbird friend, you know who you are.
You are not alone.

Disclaimer

This study has been prepared for Beyond Emancipation of Oakland, California. The author conducted this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Public Policy at Mills College and in compliance with the requirements of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Mills College Public Policy Program, the sponsoring organization, or any other agency.

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Andrea Roberson

and

My Family

Preface

She stood there, my most emotionally obscured student, with her sweatshirt tied as tight as possible around her head, tears streaming down her face, and said, “I hope it’s worth it. I hope you leaving us is worth it.” I had been working as a Mental Health Assistant at Seneca Center, a non-profit organization designed to “develop mental health treatment and support services on the principle that emotionally troubled youth do not themselves fail, but are instead failed by systems unable to address their complex and specialized needs” (Seneca Center n.d.). I worked in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) classrooms with students who were labeled as Severely Emotionally Disabled (SED). Most of them were in or had some experience with the foster care system. For the two years I spent working with them, we built meaningful, powerful relationships. I witnessed the serious mental, emotional, and physical effects of serial displacement and abuse on each student’s ability to succeed in their educational journey.

However, this struggle of carrying past trauma while still living in crisis mode, fosters overwhelming strength and courage that have become innate survival skills for many foster care children in Alameda County. The foster children I have met are brilliant in a variety of arenas and have the potential to be strong contributors to the workplace. Their ability to read people and devise creative solutions in the most stressful situations are some of the characteristics of the most successful C.E.Os. It is my belief that the public education system and the foster care system often fail these children in helping them turn their burdens into examples of their stellar strength..

Very few foster children graduate from high school or college and during these economic times. There is a delicate balance between choosing to continue supporting them at a level that has proven to be successful, or redirect resources back to the mainstream population. Simultaneously, obtaining a college-degree means even more than it used to, considering the increase in demand for jobs and the decrease in meaningful employment opportunities.

However, some community-based organizations have taken it upon themselves to help support these children and their families where public institutions fall short. Some community-based organizations are succeeding in their mission to help this often ignored and disadvantaged population. This group of young people is worth the effort and resources it takes to support them. There are detrimental economic and social welfare impacts of not supporting them.

Emancipated foster youth especially need support in gaining post-secondary education since they do not have familial foundation to help support them emotionally or financially. Helping support them to complete high school in order to be able to persevere through college will take more than money. It does not take

connections; it takes relationships. Meaningful relationships can only happen if the practices that community-based organizations develop are either institutionalized in the public education system, high schools, and colleges, or sustainably funded. This paper proves why and how institutionalization, sustainable funding, and consistent life-skills support is essential during their academic careers in order to move emancipated foster youth from an often traumatic childhood to a productive adulthood.

I also bring my own perspective to this research. I worked intensively with foster youth in a Day Treatment public school setting in East Oakland, California. I witnessed the emotional, academic, and financial barriers that foster kids have to overcome, even before they emancipate from the system. I often helped them try to navigate many public institutions, including the criminal justice system, community colleges, local, state and federal health care systems, and more. My experience in watching them try, fail, and succeed inspires me to move theory forward about what foster youth need to be successful. I believe this group of youth have a source of strength that is unmatched by most youth today. My motivation lies in the belief that there has to be a better way to harness the power of this population without discouraging, reinjuring, or further burdening the youth.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This research product was conducted on behalf of Mills College Masters in Public Department and Beyond Emancipation's (b:e) pilot b2b program to better understand why only 1-3% of former foster youth graduate from college and how the b2b program in coordination with Laney Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) can identify and meet the needs and barriers of emancipated foster youth enrolled at community college.

Research Goals

The primary critical step is identifying the needs, challenges, and successful interventions of this population, which I gathered through an extensive literature review, focus group with b2b participants, and interviews with staff and faculty that work with emancipated foster youth.

Characteristics Affecting Educational Success

My research found that for foster youth, the following characteristics make a significant impact on their educational and economic success, and overall self-sufficiency included past and perpetual trauma, quality of adult presence, housing stability, learning disability testing frequency, timing of learning information about emancipation, relevant service's location, coordinated communication between stakeholders, data location and availability and organizational structure.

Solution Driven Recommendations

The b2b program is intentionally designed to directly align its activities with its mission. As the program evolves, I suggest that they continue to build an extensive, coordinated, longitudinal, data evaluation and collection system to monitor the impacts of their services, as well as to be able to make incremental modifications as the program develops. The data shows that more extensive longitudinal studies are needed in order to accurately identify the needs and best interventions for this population.

Secondly, I recommend that b:e create a Mobile Education Counselor position. In order to improve the number of foster youth graduating from the college, then we must first increase the number that graduate from high school. The MEC will be assigned to a student as soon as they enter the foster care system and will then be in charge of maintaining their transcripts, free lunch coupons, bus passes, and other relevant material in a centralized location so that multiple placements have minimal impact on the student's educational trajectory.

When the student is in high school, the MEC becomes a guidance counselor that holds high standards of success while guiding the student through the academic

process of earning credits, learning the value of extracurricular activities, participating in the college application and financial aid process, and help connect the student with other agencies and programs that will help with the post-emancipation emotional, financial, social, and academic challenges.

Lastly, I recommend that b:e continue to engage in collaborative stakeholder conferences like the California Foster Youth Education Summit in Sacramento, California (2011). I encourage them to use their presence at these events, as a primary service provider in Alameda County, to display their positive findings in order to encourage other community colleges to institutionalize their program. They should also work on helping collapse some of the information collection duplication efforts and fix misinformation gaps. In the future, when other stakeholders notice the significant impact of the b2b program, then b:e can use this leverage to help create a collaborative governance policy-making group that can be cohesive, streamline information across community colleges, and apply uniform standards, vocabulary, and data collection methods in order to have a full, detailed, and reliable information to interpret patterns of needs, challenges, interventions, and success.

When asked what helps this student persist through high school, this student responded,

"What helps me is thinking to myself, I have no choice but to get through this and saying to myself, I want to be successful, so I have to get this done."

