

Memo from CaYOUTH



An Early Look at Predictors of College Degree Completion at Age 23 for Foster Youth

Nathanael J. Okpych

Sunggeun (Ethan) Park

Mark E. Courtney

Jenna Powers

September 2021

 **CHAPIN HALL**
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Introduction

Graduating from college is a life-transforming achievement for young people with foster care backgrounds. Not only do the majority of adolescents in foster care aspire to finish college (Courtney et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2014), but holding a degree has been associated with an increased likelihood of being employed and having higher earnings (Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Salazar, 2013). Still, existing research estimates that fewer than one in ten foster youth complete 2-year or 4-year degrees by early adulthood. The importance of increasing postsecondary education access and completion has been underscored by federal laws designed to help foster youth. These laws, enacted over the past few decades, have increased funding for college-related services, established postsecondary education grants, and given states the option of extending the foster care age limit. Collectively, these laws aim to reduce material hardships, increase youths' skills, and build networks of support around foster youth who are pursuing postsecondary education.

Few studies have investigated factors that promote or hinder foster youths' likelihood of completing a college degree. This is due in part to the considerable amount of time it takes to track youths' postsecondary education status. Many studies of youth with foster care involvement do not follow participants long enough to assess degree completion. For example, the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) study tracks foster care alumni up to age 21, too young to meaningfully assess degree completion. Large national studies of postsecondary education attainment (for example,

Beginning Postsecondary Education) have yet to incorporate a variable that reliably identifies youth with foster care backgrounds. Thus, compared to other postsecondary education outcomes (for example, enrollment and persistence), we know less about factors that contribute to degree completion (Okpych, 2021).

One study analyzed data collected from the Midwest Study to examine predictors of degree completion up to 29/30 years old (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). This study included nearly 330 Midwest Study participants who enrolled in college and who could be observed for 6 years. A main takeaway from this study is that few background characteristics (such as foster care history or educational history) were significantly related to the odds of completing a college degree. Rather, events and circumstances occurring after youth had enrolled in college—having a child, encountering economic hardships, and needing to work—were each found to reduce youths’ odds of completing a degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Other in-depth interviews with academically successful college students with foster care backgrounds suggest other factors can hinder college success. These include mental health difficulties, being distrustful of relationships, having conflicts with family, gaps in housing and food, and the stigma associated with foster care (see, for example, Day et al., 2012; Morton, 2018; Salazar et al., 2016; Tobolowsky et al., 2019).

Given the importance of college degree completion for foster youth and the limited research on this topic, this memo provides an early look at contributors to college degree completion for participants in the CalYOUTH Study. We draw on data collected from the several hundred youths who participated in the longitudinal study to identify factors that promote or stymie youths’ likelihood of completing a college degree by around age 23.

Methods

Data Sources

The primary data source for this memo is the in-person interviews conducted with a representative sample of young people in California child-welfare-supervised foster care (Courtney et al., 2014). The first wave of interviews took place in 2013 when participants were 17 years old, and follow-up interviews were completed roughly 2 years apart—when participants were ages 19, 21, and 23. Information collected from the age-17 interviews was used to create many of the measures of predictors of degree completion. The second data source is the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)¹, which provided information on youths’ college enrollment and degree completion. The third data

¹ The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit and nongovernmental organization that provides enrollment and graduation records for more than 3,600 participating colleges and universities in the U.S (NSC, 2019a). NSC records account for about 97% of all currently enrolled students and nearly 99% of all

source is administrative child welfare records from California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS). This statewide administrative data system was used to create measures of youths' maltreatment and foster care history. The fourth and final data source is an online survey conducted with a representative sample of California child welfare workers who were supervising the care of CalYOUTH participants while they were in extended foster care ($n = 295$ workers; Courtney et al. 2016).² Part of the online survey collected information about workers' perceptions of the postsecondary education training and services in their county to support transition-age foster youth.

Samples

The first sample for this memo includes 719 youths from the CalYOUTH longitudinal study. Of the 727 youths who completed the baseline surveys, the analysis excluded five youths who had passed away before the age-23 interviews and three youths without college completion information.³ To be eligible for the baseline CalYOUTH survey, a young person had to be between the ages of 16.75 and 17.75 when the sample was drawn in December 2012 and who had been in child-welfare-supervised foster care for at least 6 months. Of the nearly 2,500 youths who met these study criteria, a sample of 880 youths were randomly selected into the study. After excluding 117 youths who were later deemed to be ineligible for the study, in-person interviews were conducted with 727 youths (for a response rate of 95%). Of the 727 youths who completed the baseline interview, a total of 622 completed the age-23 interview (for a response rate of 84%), which took place between April 2019 and January 2020.

In addition to the full sample of CalYOUTH participants ($n = 719$), we ran separate analyses on the subset of youth who had enrolled in college ($n = 446$). Of all the participants, 61.8% had enrolled in college. The sample of college enrollees includes some youth who enrolled in college soon before their degree completion status was obtained in the NSC data; these students had a relatively small amount of time in which they could have completed a degree. We ran a second college enrollee analysis that included just the 381 youths (52.9% of the full sample) who had first enrolled in college at least 3 years before the NSC data were obtained (that is, on average, before youth were about 20.5 years old). All 381 youths had at least 3 years to complete a college degree before their degree status was observed

postsecondary education institutions (NSC, 2019b). NSC includes all types of postsecondary education institutions, including in-state and out-of-state schools, 2-year and 4-year schools, and public and private schools. The NSC also includes trade and vocational schools.

² The child welfare worker surveys were completed in summer 2015. A caseworker was eligible for the study if they had a CalYOUTH participant who was in extended foster care at that time. On average, youth were about 19.5 years old at the time of the child welfare worker survey. The 295 workers supervised 493 CalYOUTH participants in extended care.

³ Three youths did not complete the age-23 interviews and did not grant permission to access administrative NSC data.

in the NSC data.⁴ In this memo, we refer to the analysis of this subsample of college enrollees as the “sensitivity analysis.” Most of the findings from the sensitivity analysis ($n = 381$) were similar to those of the analysis of all college enrollees ($n = 446$), with a few notable differences. The differences are summarized in text.

Measures

The outcome examined in this memo is a measure of whether youth completed a 2-year or 4-year college degree by about age 23 (0 = no, 1 = yes). We drew on data from the Wave 4 CalYOUTH interviews and from NSC data. At the time of the interview, most youths were 23 years old (83%), although some were 22 years old (2%) or 24 years old (15%). The NSC data were obtained in May 2019, when participants were, on average, 23.5 years old. Youth were marked as having completed a college degree if they reported earning a college degree in their age-23 CalYOUTH interview or if their NSC record indicated that they had completed a college degree. On their own, each of these sources have limitations; by using both sources, we can overcome these limitations. For example, the NSC data reports degree completion information for the CalYOUTH participants who had not completed the fourth interview wave, and CalYOUTH data can identify youth who attended and completed college but whose information was blocked in the NSC data.⁵

We examined several groups of potential predictors of degree completion. These included demographic characteristics, personality traits, educational background characteristics, maltreatment and foster care history characteristics, youths’ involvement in their foster care planning and information they received about extended foster care, behavioral health problems, social support, and postsecondary education services in their county (based on caseworker perceptions). Additionally, in the analysis involving just the youth who enrolled in college, we also analyzed several characteristics of the college the youth first enrolled in, as well as whether youth were involved in a campus support program (CSP) at any point in college and whether they had received an Education and Training Voucher (ETV).⁶

⁴ Ideally, we would have used a cutoff that was longer than 3 years. However, doing so would have drastically reduced the sample size for the analysis. We used 3 years as the cutoff because nearly 90% of youth in this sample first enrolled in a 2-year college, and 3 years is equivalent to 150% of the time needed to complete a 2-year degree (a commonly used time frame to assess Associate’s degree completion).

⁵ In the data sent by the NSC, some records were blocked by the student (i.e., the student requested a FERPA block to prevent their information from being disclosed) or by the institution. The identity of students whose records are blocked are not disclosed by the NSC to protect the student’s privacy, and information about the students’ college enrollment and completion are not included in the data. Since the NSC data requested by CalYOUTH in May 2019 included a larger sample of youth in California foster care ($n \approx 53,000$), we do not know the exact number of youth in the longitudinal study sample whose records were blocked. However, previous NSC data obtained in January 2019, which included just youth in the longitudinal study sample, resulted in 30 blocked records (28 records blocked by the student and two records blocked by the institution).

⁶ A CSP is a campus-based program serving college students with foster care histories that provides an array of services intended to promote persistence (for example, coaching, skill-building workshops, advocacy, peer support groups, referrals to campus and community programs, and emergency funding). At the time of this study, 30 out

A full list of the predictors included in the analyses can be found at the bottom of Table 1. There were also several other factors that were considered for this memo but were not included in the final analyses.⁷

Analyses

We first present descriptive statistics on the percentage of CalYOUTH participants who enrolled in college and who completed a college degree by around age 23. We then present findings from the two regression analyses that investigated predictors of degree completion for the full sample of CalYOUTH participants and for the subsample of college enrollees. Survey weights were used when calculating the results, which took into account features of the CalYOUTH Study sampling approach (for more information see Courtney et al., 2014).

Findings

As displayed in Figure 1, among all CalYOUTH participants ($n = 719$), the majority of youth had enrolled in college (61.8%). Overall, just about one in ten youth (9.6%) had completed a college degree, including 6.0% who completed a 2-year degree and 3.6% who completed a 4-year degree.

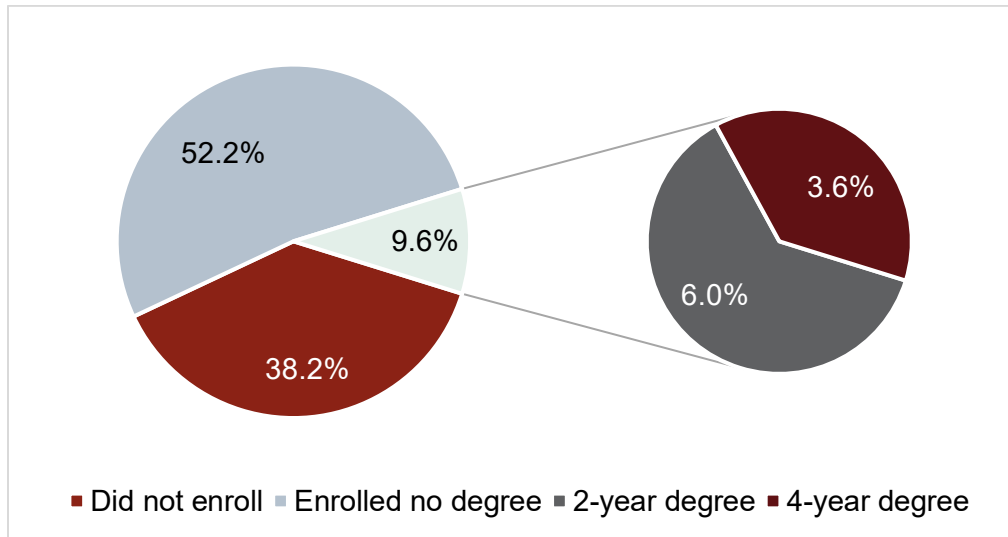
Among those who had enrolled in college any time before the NSC draw ($n = 446$), about one in six youth (15.6%) had completed a degree, including 9.7% who completed a 2-year degree and 5.9% who completed a 4-year degree. When looking at youth in the sensitivity analysis sample ($n = 381$), the graduation rate was slightly higher. Among youth who had enrolled in college 3 or more years before the NSC draw, about 16.7% had completed a degree, including 10.2% who completed a 2-year degree and 6.5% who completed a 4-year degree.

of 32 public 4-year schools and 89 out of 114 public 2-year schools had a CSP (Okpych et al., 2020). An ETV is a federally funded grant of up to \$5,000 per year that foster youth can use to pay for college, vocational school, or training expenses.

⁷ Several predictors were not found to be statistically significantly associated ($p < .05$) with the odds of degree completion in bivariate regression models (that is, models that investigated one predictor at a time).

Consequently, these predictors were not included in the final model in Table 1. The excluded predictors are: youth's high school diploma/GED completion status; number of school changes due to foster care or family moves, receiving educational preparation services, receiving correct information about extended foster care, amount of information received about extended foster care, knowledge of California extended foster care, youth externalizing disorder at age 17, employment status at age 17, adequacy of social support (emotional, tangible, advice), amount of encouragement to pursue education beyond high school (from high school personnel, from biological family), ever expelled from school, caseworkers' perceived helpfulness of postsecondary education services in their county, number of remedial college courses youth had to take (college enrollee analysis only).

Figure 1. Rates of College Enrollment and Degree Completion (*n* = 719)



Abbreviated results from the regression analyses are presented in Table 1. This table only displays factors that were statistically significantly associated ($p < .05$) with youths' odds of degree completion. The middle column displays the results in the full CalYOUTH sample ($n = 719$) while the right column displays results for the college enrollee sample ($n = 446$). A note at the bottom of the table lists the additional sets of predictors that were included in the regression models but that were not significantly associated with degree completion. The results in the table are displayed as odds ratios (ORs).

As displayed in the table, the estimated odds of completing a college degree were lower for males than for females. Youth who identified with a sexual orientation other than 100% heterosexual were also less likely than their peers to earn a college degree. These differences by gender and sexual orientation were found to be statistically significant in both the whole sample and the college enrollee sample. The results also show that, in both samples, youth who had ever repeated a grade in elementary or secondary school were less likely to finish college than were youth who were never held back a grade.

Several additional factors were significantly associated with the expected odds of degree completion, but only in the sample of all CalYOUTH participants. During the age-17 interview, participants completed a brief assessment of their reading proficiency. An increase of one standard deviation in a youth's reading score increased a youth's estimated odds of completing a degree by about 5%. Youths' reported grades in high school were also associated with completing college. Specifically, youth who reported that they earned mostly As were significantly more likely to complete a degree than youth who said they earned mostly Ds or lower in their high school classes. The only aspect of youths' foster care history found to be significantly related to their odds of degree completion had to do with whether they had ever been placed in a foster home with relatives. Youth who had ever been in kinship care before the age of 18 were more likely than their peers who had never been in kinship care to earn a

degree. When youth were asked about the role they played in their Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP) during the age-17 interviews, youth who led their TILP planning were more likely to complete college than were youth who said they were not aware of their TILP planning or that they were uninvolved in their TILP planning. Finally, youth who said they received “a lot” of encouragement to continue their education beyond high school from foster care personnel (such as foster parents, group home staff, social workers, other professionals) were more likely to finish college than were youth who said they received “a little” or “no” encouragement from foster care personnel.

In the sample of college enrollees, there were three additional statistically significant findings. Among college enrollees, Black youth had greater odds of completing a degree than did White youth. The other two significant findings pertained to youths’ receipt of an ETV and the type of college they first enrolled in. The estimated odds of completing a college degree were about four times higher for youth who first enrolled in a 4-year college than for youth who first enrolled in a 2-year college. Second, the estimated odds of completing a degree were almost 2.4 times higher for youth who received an ETV than for youth who did not receive an ETV.

For the most part, findings from the sensitivity analysis were consistent with findings from the analysis of all college enrollees. In the sensitivity analysis, statistically significant differences were found in terms of gender, race (i.e., Black youth vs. White youth), sexual minority status, grade repetition, and receipt of an ETV. There were a few new findings. Hispanic youth had significantly higher odds of completing a degree than did White youth ($OR = 4.69, p = .038$). Youths’ behavioral health histories were also found to lower the likelihood that youth earned a degree. At age 17, screening positive for an anxiety disorder ($OR = 0.14, p = .042$) or for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; $OR = 0.06, p = .024$) both decreased the expected odds of completing a degree. Finally, the difference in expected odds of degree completion between youth who first attended 4-year colleges versus 2-year colleges was marginally statistically significant in the sensitivity analysis ($OR = 5.18, p = .068$), whereas it was statistically significant ($p < .05$) in the main analysis of college enrollees.

Table 1. Factors Associated with Youths' Odds of Completed a College Degree by Age 23

	All CalYOUTH participants (<i>n</i> = 719)	College enrollees (<i>n</i> = 446)
	OR	OR
Demographic characteristics		
Male (ref: female)	0.38*	0.22**
Race/ethnicity (ref: White)		
Black/African American	2.92	4.93*
Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian/AK Native	5.01	4.89
Multiracial	0.98	1.25
Hispanic	2.25	3.30
Identifies as sexual minority youth	0.29**	0.17**
Educational background		
Reading proficiency	1.05**	1.02
Grades in high school (ref: mostly Ds or lower)		
Mostly Cs	1.71	2.24
Mostly Bs	2.97	2.43
Mostly As	10.2**	3.87
Ever repeated a grade	0.39*	0.33*
Foster care history		
Ever in kinship care	2.40*	1.75
Foster care planning and information		
Role in TILP development (ref: Not involved in TILP or		
Involved but did not lead	1.21	1.22
Involved and led	2.90*	2.08
Social Support		
Foster care personnel: Encouragement to continue	1.86*	1.54
Institutional characteristics (first college)		
4-year college (ref: 2-year college)	n/a	5.15*
ETV		
Received an ETV	n/a	3.36*

Table note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table note. The following predictors were included in the regression models but were not statistically significant ($p < .05$):

Demographic characteristics: Race/ethnicity, age at Wave 1 interview, age at NSC data draw (full sample only), age first enrolled in college (college enrollee sample only), number of years between age first enrolled in college and age at NSC data draw (college enrollee sample only).

Personality traits and perceptions: The Big 5 personality traits: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness to new experiences.

Educational background: Ever placed in a special education classroom, college aspirations.

Maltreatment and foster care history: Age first entered foster care, average number of placement changes per year in care, ever in congregate care setting, years in extended foster care, substantiated maltreatment history (sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse).

Foster care planning and information: Satisfaction with team meetings to help youth decide if they will stay remain in extended foster care, develop an independent living plan, and other decisions about the future.

Behavioral health problems: Positive screen for a mood disorder, positive screen for an anxiety disorder, positive screen for a substance use disorder, positive screen for ADHD.

Other risk factors: Was a parent at age-17 interview, ever arrested

County-level characteristics: County size/urbanicity, caseworkers' average perception of postsecondary education service/training for foster youth (availability of services, satisfaction with collaboration with postsecondary education services/training).

Institution-level characteristics (only in the regression model of college enrollees): Average retention rate, % of students enrolled part time, average per-student expenditures (instruction, academic support, student support).

Campus-based support program (only in the regression model of college enrollees): Youth participated in a campus-based support program.

Study Limitations

Our findings should be interpreted cautiously due to some study limitations. First, youths' degree completion was measured when most participants were 23 years old, which may be too early for some youth (for example, if they were enrolled in a 4-year college). Previous studies suggest that youth in care enroll in college later than their peers and take longer to complete a degree (Okpych, 2021; Day et al., 2021). Consequently, this memo is best understood as an early look at predictors of degree completion for CalYOUTH participants. Second, some of the self-reported predictors included in this analysis may not be as reliable as official records (such as high school grades). Third, the analysis may have omitted some important control variables, which could lead to less accurate estimates of relationships between the predictors and degree completion. Fourth, this study may be statistically underpowered to detect statistically significant associations, particularly in the model of college enrollees where the sample size was smaller. Several predictors in this analysis had odds ratios that were similar to the odds ratios in the full model but that did not attain statistical significance ($p < .05$). Finally, the study's findings may not be generalizable to foster youth in states other than California.

Discussion

A key finding of this memo is that the majority of CalYOUTH participants had enrolled in college, and nearly 10% had attained a 2- or 4-year college degree by around age 23. These rates are generally higher than rates reported in other studies of transition-age foster youth. For example, the Midwest Study reported that 6.2% of participants had completed a college degree by age 23 (Courtney et al., 2010). The higher rates in the CalYOUTH Study may be a result, at least in part, of the investments made in the past two decades in California aimed at increasing college access and persistence for foster youth (for example, extended foster care, ETVs, campus-based support programs, community college tuition fee waivers). As noted above, this memo reports on degree completion at a relatively early age. A future CalYOUTH memo will assess degree completion when participants are older (for example, by age 25), using more recent NSC data.

Several predictors were found to be significantly associated with the odds of degree completion in the model with all CalYOUTH participants but not in the model that included just college enrollees. These were markers of youths' academic achievement (that is, reading proficiency and high school grades) and postsecondary education encouragement received from foster care personnel, as well as the role they played in TILP meetings and ever having been placed in a kinship foster home. The magnitude of these factors generally became smaller and nonsignificant in the college enrollee sample. This suggests that part of the predictors' influence on degree completion has to do with increasing the odds that youth enroll in college. These findings are consistent with a previous analysis of Midwest Study data (Okpych, 2021), where aspects of youths' educational and foster care backgrounds (such as reading proficiency and school changes) were significantly related to college enrollment but not to degree completion among college enrollees. Rather, contemporaneous factors such as having childcare responsibilities, needing to work, and facing economic hardships while in college played larger roles in their odds of finishing college (Okpych, 2021). One factor that was statistically significant in both the overall sample and the college enrollee sample is grade repetition. Youth who had ever repeated a grade were significantly less likely to earn a degree than were youth who had never been held back. There are many factors that can contribute to grade repetition (such as missed school due to foster care moves, undiagnosed learning disorders, or inadequate academic and emotional support available to students), but the findings suggest that youth who had ever repeated a grade will benefit from extra support as they make their way to a college degree.

Two additional findings that were statistically significant in both samples related to gender and sexual orientation. After accounting for the other factors that were accounted for in the regression models, males were significantly less likely than females to complete a college degree. This is not driven just by females being more likely than males to enroll in college; in fact, among just college enrollees, females were still more likely than males to earn a degree. This may be due to males being more likely than females to pursue employment in early adulthood. For example, another study analyzed data from the National Youth in Transitions Database and found that at age 21 males were more likely than females to be only employed, whereas females were more likely than males to be both enrolled and employed (Geiger & Okpych, 2021). The finding about sexual minority youth is concerning, as young people who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other nonheterosexual orientations were less likely than youth who identified as 100% heterosexual to earn a degree. Similar to the gender disparity, this finding is not simply a product of differences in enrollment rates. LGBTQ youth may face additional stigmatization both on campus and off (such as less support from family) that can contribute to feelings of isolation, increased prevalence of mental health issues, increased risk of discrimination and physical harm, homelessness, and resource gaps (Forge et al., 2018; Munson et al., 2020; Paul, 2020). This study contributes to a growing body of work on difficulties LGBTQ foster youth face during the transition to adulthood and underscores the need for protective supports and services.

We found a difference by race/ethnicity in the analysis that included college enrollees. The odds of completing a college degree were higher for Black youth than for White youth. In the sensitivity analysis, Hispanic youth were also found to have significantly greater odds of earning a degree compared to White youth.⁸ These are promising findings as they counter general trends in college outcomes, which report that graduation rates tend to be lower for Black and Hispanic students than for Asian American and White students (Causey et al., 2020). Studies of college outcomes among foster youth have not reported consistent differences by race and ethnicity in terms of persistence or degree completion (see, for example, Courtney & Hook, 2017; Geiger & Okpych, 2021; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Okpych et al., 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). In the current analysis, there were no significant differences by race and ethnicity in a simple analysis that did not account for youths' background characteristics and college characteristics. For example, among college enrollees ($n = 446$), the degree completion rates did not differ significantly between youth who were White (14.4%), Black (16.8%), or Hispanic (17.2%). However, after statistically controlling for differences in youths' educational and foster care histories, characteristics of the colleges they enrolled in, and other factors in the regression models, significant differences emerged. Future analyses should more closely examine these factors to identify differences between racial groups in their background experiences and the colleges they enroll in that contribute to their likelihood of completing a degree.

Two findings from the college enrollee analysis pertained to college type and receipt of ETV. Youth who first enrolled in a 4-year college were significantly more likely than youth who enrolled in a 2-year college to complete a degree. This finding was robust after controlling for a wide range of youth characteristics. The finding is consistent with past analyses of Midwest Study data (Okpych & Courtney, 2018), which also found that foster youth who enrolled in 4-year colleges were more likely than youth in 2-year colleges to graduate. While 2-year schools may be an appropriate on-ramp for some foster youth, 4-year schools have substantially higher retention and graduation rates, offer more resources and supports, and have a stronger college culture that can promote persistence. Four-year colleges may provide a more robust network of support and resources that promote college retention and completion. It is important to note that only about 11% of youth in this study first enrolled in a 4-year college.

A second finding in the college enrollee sample is that youth who received an ETV were more likely than their counterparts to earn a degree. This makes sense in light of findings from an earlier study reporting that economic hardships contribute to foster youth leaving college without a degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Since California experienced an ETV funding shortfall in the 2010s (Tureck, 2016), when many CalYOUTH participants were first enrolling in college, substantial proportions of CalYOUTH

⁸ In the full sample ($n = 719$), compared to White youth, the odds of completing a degree were marginally significantly greater for Black youth ($OR = 3.49, p = .051$), Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian/Alaskan Native youth ($OR = 4.61, p = .067$), and Hispanic youth ($OR = 2.54, p = .072$).

participants may have applied for but never received an ETV. For example, nearly 1 in 5 21-year-olds (18%) in the CalYOUTH Study who finished a high school credential reported that they applied for an ETV but never received one (Courtney et al., 2018). ETVs may provide critical funding that helps reduce financial strain for foster youth, increasing their economic stability as they pursue a college degree. Future studies are needed to see if the promising findings reported here are replicated in studies employing more rigorous research designs.

Findings from the sensitivity analysis, which included a subset of college enrollees who first enrolled in college at least 3 years before their degree status was tracked, were largely consistent with the findings from the sample that included all college enrollees. The sensitivity analysis did point to two behavioral health issues that were found to decrease youths' estimated odds of earning a college degree: a history of anxiety and a history of ADHD. These findings are not surprising since anxiety and concentration difficulties can interfere with students' academic performance, and the findings warrant further study. These studies should assess foster youths' behavioral health and learning disability needs while they are in college, as well as their utilization of services (such as psychotherapy or the college center for students with disabilities).

While we found several significant predictors of degree completion that we describe in this memo, it is also important to mention a few factors that were not found to significantly predict the expected odds of degree completion. Time in extended care was not found to significantly predict degree completion. This is consistent with findings from the Midwest Study and earlier findings from the CalYOUTH Study, which report that EFC increases college enrollment but not persistence or degree completion. Compared to enrolling in college, persisting to degree completion is a more arduous task that likely requires more intensive supports that are geared to promoting college success.

Although campus-based support program participation was marginally significantly related to degree completion in the regression model without any control variables, it was not a significant predictor in the full model with all of the predictors.⁹ An earlier analysis of CalYOUTH data found that CSP participation significantly increased the odds of one-year persistence (Okpych et al., 2020). There are several possible explanations for the absence of statistical significance in the current analysis. First, it

⁹ CalYOUTH participants were classified as having not enrolled in a campus-based support program for foster youth (CSP), enrolled a short while/some of college, or enrolled most of college. In the sample of college enrollees ($n = 446$), in the model with no control variables, compared to youth who had not participated in a CSP while in college, youth who participated in a CSP "most of college" were marginally significantly more likely to complete a degree ($OR = 1.86, p = .065$). There was not marginally significant difference between youth who had not participated in a CSP and youth who participated for "a short while/some of college" ($OR = 1.32, p = .550$). In the model with control variables, youth who participated in a CSP "most of college" ($OR = 0.62, p = .272$) or "a short while/some of college" ($OR = 0.97, p = .967$) did not significantly differ from youth who did not participate in a CSP in their expected odds of earning a degree.

may be that, on average, CSPs are effective at retaining students through the critical first year in college but are less effective at seeing students through the subsequent years that it typically takes to complete a degree. During this stretch of time, youth may lose key benefits (such as extended foster care), other life events may derail their path to a degree (including childcare responsibilities or housing and economic instability), or other opportunities may arise (such as full-time employment). Second, it may be that our CSP measure is not sharp enough to pick up on important differences in youths' level of engagement with the CSP (for example, consistent use of academic coaching and skill-building workshops). Third, our analyses are not able to study specific features and services of CSPs that may impact graduation rates. For example, some CSPs with low staff-to-student ratios that offer a wide array of intensive support services may be effective at elevating youths' odds of graduating, whereas programs that offer light-touch services may be less impactful.

Finally, given recent initiatives in California to increase college participation for foster youth, it may be that an increasingly large share of foster youth entering college are less prepared than those who entered college in the past for college-level work and less committed to finishing college. This can weaken the estimated impact of CSPs. As the number of CSPs across the nation continues to grow, more research is needed both to evaluate the impact of CSPs and to identify program models or components that may be particularly effective. It is also important to recognize that CSPs likely offer many other benefits to participants, other than simply working toward a degree. CSPs can help participants avoid financial and economic hardships in early adulthood, connect youth to a network of social support that will outlast their time in college, provide guidance to a career that fits their talents and interests, and support them in completing at least some college, improving their employment prospects (Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

References

- Causey, J., Huie, F., Lang, R., Ryu, M., & Shapiro, D. (2020). *Completing college 2020: A national view of student completion rates for 2014 entering cohort (Signature Report 19)*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>
- Courtney, M. E., Charles, P., Okpych, N. J., Napolitano, L., & Halsted, K. (2014). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of foster youth at age 17*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_YT_RE1214-1.pdf
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A. L., Lee, J. S., & Raap, M. (2010). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at ages 23 and 24*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Midwest-Eval-Outcomes-at-Age-23-and-24.pdf>

- Courtney, M. E., & Hook, J. L. (2017). The potential educational benefits of extending foster care to young adults: Findings from a natural experiment. *Children & Youth Services Review, 72*, 124–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2016.09.030>
- Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Mikell, D., Stevenson, B., Park, K., Harty, J., Feng, H., & Kindle, B. (2016). *CalYOUTH Survey of Young Adults' Child Welfare Workers*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_CW_RE0516_1.pdf
- Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Park, K., Harty, J., Feng, H., & Torr s-Garcia, A. (2018). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_YT_RE0518_1.pdf
- Courtney, M. E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/conditions-of-youth-preparing-to-leave-state-care/>
- Day, A. G., Smith, R. J., & Tajima, E. A. (2021). Stopping out and its impact on college graduation among a sample of foster care alumni: A joint scale-change accelerated failure time analysis. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 12*(1), 11–39. <https://doi.org/10.1086/712892>
- Day, A., Riebschleger, J., Dworsky, A., Damashek, A., & Fogarty, K. (2012). Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change. *Children & Youth Services Review, 34*(5), 1007–1014. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2012.02.001>
- Forge, N., Hartinger-Saunders, R., Wright, E., & Ruel, E. (2018). Out of the system and onto the streets: LGBTQ-identified youth experiencing homelessness with past child welfare system involvement. *Child Welfare, 96*(2), 47-74.
- Geiger, J. M., & Okpych, N. (2021). Connected after care: The role of youth characteristics, policy, and programs in postsecondary education and employment for youth with foster care histories. *Child Maltreatment*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595211034763>
- Morton, B. M. (2018). The grip of trauma: How trauma disrupts the academic aspirations of foster youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 75*, 73–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.04.021>
- Munson, M. R., Katz, C. C., Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (2020). Mental health management among older youth in foster care: Service utilization and preparedness. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 67*(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.02.017>
- National Student Clearinghouse. (2019a). About the NSC. <https://studentclearinghouse.org/educational-organizations/studenttracker-for-educational-organizations/>

- National Student Clearinghouse. (2019b). Fact sheet. <https://studentclearinghouse.info/onestop/wp-content/uploads/NSCFactSheet.pdf>
- Okpych, N. J. (2021). *Climbing a broken ladder: Contributors of college success for youth in foster care*. Rutgers University Press.
- Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (2014). Does education pay for youth formerly in foster care?: Comparison of employment outcomes with a national sample. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 43, 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.04.013>
- Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (2018). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 23(1), 28–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118791776>
- Okpych, N. J., Park, S., Sayed, S., & Courtney, M. E. (2020). The roles of Campus-Support Programs (CSPs) and Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) on college persistence for youth with foster care histories. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 111, 104891. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104891>
- Paul, J. C. (2020). Exploring support for LGBTQ youth transitioning from foster care to emerging adulthood. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 119, 105481. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105481>
- Rosenberg, R., & Kim, Y. (2018). Aging out of foster care: Homelessness, post-secondary education, and employment. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 12(1), 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2017.1347551>
- 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>
- Salazar, A. M., Jones, K. R., Emerson, J. C., & Mucha, L. (2016). Postsecondary strengths, challenges, and supports experienced by foster care alumni college graduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(3), 263–279. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0029>
- Tobolowsky, B. F., Scannapieco, M., Aguiniga, D. M., & Madden, E. E. (2019). Former foster youth experiences with higher education: Opportunities and challenges. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 104, 104362. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.05.039>
- Tureck, S. (2016). Chafee education grants: The margin between school and survival. *The Imprint*. <https://imprintnews.org/opinion/chafee-education-grants-margin-school-survival/18644>

Recommended Citation

Okpych, N. J., Park, S., Courtney, M. E., & Powers, J. (2021). *Memo from CalYOUTH: An early look at predictors of college degree completion at age 23 for foster youth*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Related Publications

Okpych, N. J., Park, S., & Courtney, M. E. (2019). *Memo from CalYOUTH: Early findings on the impact of extended foster care on foster youths' postsecondary education enrollment and persistence*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Harty, J. S., Feng, H., Park, S., Powers, J., Nadon, M., Ditto, D. J., & Park, K. (2020). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 23*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Contact

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
1313 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
T: 773.256.5100
F: 773.753.5940
www.chapinhall.org

Disclaimer

The findings reported herein were performed with the permission of the California Department of Social Services. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and should not be considered as representing the policy of the collaborating agency or any agency of the California government.

Acknowledgement

We would like to recognize our project funders: the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Reissa Foundation, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, the Zellerbach Family Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, and the California Wellness Foundation.

Statement of Independence and Integrity

Chapin Hall adheres to the values of science, meeting the highest standards of ethics, integrity, rigor, and objectivity in its research, analyses, and reporting. Learn more about the principles that drive our work in our [Statement of Independence](#).

Chapin Hall partners with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists at the forefront of research and policy development by applying a unique blend of scientific research, real-world experience, and policy expertise to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change for children and families.

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.