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A Call for Holistic, Trauma-Informed Support: Addressing Basic Needs Insecurity Among Foster Youth in Higher Education

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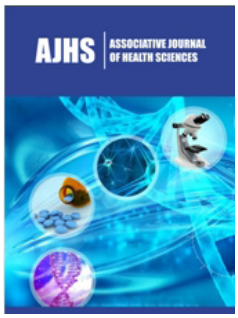

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Abstract

Foster youth in colleges and universities often suffer from the lack of basic needs, including food, housing, transportation, healthcare, and mental health support, which represents a critical barrier to educational success among foster youth in higher education. This population faces disproportionate rates of homelessness, food insecurity, and financial instability that fundamentally undermine their academic progress and psychological well-being. Utilizing recent empirical studies and institutional case examples, we will examine the magnitude of this crisis, analyze current institutional responses, and advocate for comprehensive, trauma-informed interventions. The analysis will reveal that while some promising practices exist, most institutions lack the systematic, holistic approaches necessary to address the intersectional nature of foster youth's needs. We will conclude with evidence-based recommendations for institutional reform, policy advocacy, and the development of wraparound support systems that recognize foster youth not merely as students with deficits, but as resilient individuals whose success requires holistic approaches.

Introduction

The transition from foster care to higher education represents a particularly vulnerable period for young adults who have experienced childhood trauma, family separation, and institutional instability [1]. Unlike their peers who often rely on family support during college years, former foster youth must navigate higher education while simultaneously developing independent living skills, managing complex trauma responses, and addressing fundamental survival needs. This intersection of developmental challenges, educational demands, and resource scarcity creates a perfect storm that threatens both academic persistence and long-term life outcomes [2].

Many foster youth have high hopes of becoming college graduates, while also seeking a place to belong and be accepted. Unfortunately, this does not always happen with most. Foster youth are sometimes looked upon as "different" or "not wanted." These youths struggle to overcome the stereotype imposed upon them because they lack a support system. Some struggle to continue their education by any means necessary, and some are unable to do so, so they drop out. Those who drop out sometimes return to complete their education and defy the stereotype imposed upon them. Either way, these students go through hardships that traditional students with family support do not.

This transition from foster care to higher education without a support system causes high stress in students, making it a challenge for them to be successful. These students have experienced more than foster care. Wrapped in their experience is childhood trauma, family

separation, and both personal and institutional instability, leaving them to navigate higher education while developing the skills needed to be independent and have survival skills.

Research shows noticeable disparities in basic needs security between foster youth and their peers in higher education settings. These noticeable differences extend beyond simple resource availability to encompass complex interactions between trauma history, institutional support systems, and societal safety nets. Understanding and addressing these disparities requires transcending traditional student support models toward an all-inclusive, trauma-informed approach that recognizes the unique strengths and needs of this population.

Food insecurity: a daily struggle

Food insecurity among youth in higher education occurs at rates that should alarm any institution committed to student success. However, when there are added stressors such as foster care, the numbers are even higher. A survey by Trellis Strategies (2023) found that 45% of foster youth experience very low food security, compared to 22% of their non-foster peers. This statistic, however, fails to capture the daily reality of students who skip meals to afford textbooks, who hoard food from campus events, or who experience the shame and anxiety that accompany constant hunger.

The impact of food insecurity extends beyond physical health to affect cognitive function, emotional regulation, and social engagement. A former foster youth described their experience, stating, "You can't focus on focusing in class when you're thinking about whether you will have food to eat. I would sit in class hungry, too embarrassed to ask for help. I was too proud to admit I couldn't afford the meal plan others had."

Research shows that food-insecure students show decreased academic performance, increased rates of depression and anxiety, and a higher likelihood of course withdrawal [3]. Foster youth, who already navigate complex trauma histories and experience food insecurity, also struggle with mental health challenges, which can trigger memories of childhood neglect or deprivation.

Housing instability: the foundation of insecurity

As of 2025, housing insecurity affects approximately 69% of foster youth in higher education. Rates such as these reflect the unique challenges this population faces in securing stable, affordable accommodation. Unlike traditional students who may return to family homes during breaks or receive family financial support for housing, foster youth must navigate these spaces alone, often without established credit histories, parental co-signers, or financial safety nets.

A report conducted by the Washington Student Achievement Council (2023) discovered that nearly one in four foster youth (23.7%) experienced homelessness in the year prior to starting college [4]. This statistic represents individual stories of resilience under extraordinary circumstances, such as Jessica. Jessica, a former foster youth completing her social work degree, stated, "I couch-surfed through my junior year, carrying everything I owned in my car. I'd study in 24-hour diners because I couldn't concentrate in temporary spaces where I never knew if I'd be welcome the next day." Jessica's story is one amongst thousands who navigate these spaces without any support, without being seen, and without being heard.

Housing instability creates cascading effects that permeate every aspect of a student's educational experience. Unstable housing correlates with increased stress hormones, disrupted sleep patterns, and difficulty maintaining consistent study routines. Students experiencing housing insecurity often struggle with basic hygiene, professional appearance for internships or jobs, and the social connections that typically support college persistence [5].

Financial insecurity: beyond tuition and fees

Financial difficulties affect 83% of foster youth in higher education compared to 71% of their peers, but these statistics obscure the qualitatively different nature of economic challenges faced by this population. While many college students experience financial stress, foster youth navigate this stress without family financial support, emergency assistance, or the safety net of returning home if resources become unavailable.

Financial challenges extend beyond educational expenses to encompass basic survival needs, often subsidized by families for traditional students. Foster youth must independently manage healthcare costs, transportation, professional clothing, technology, and emergency expenses while maintaining academic progress. Many work multiple jobs, often in positions that offer flexibility around class schedules but provide minimal income and limited benefits.

Dr. Amy Dworsky's longitudinal research through the Midwest Study demonstrates that financial insecurity among foster youth often leads to a cascade of difficult choices, choosing between medication and textbooks, between car repairs and tuition payments, between adequate nutrition and housing stability. These choices create chronic stress that research consistently links to decreased academic performance and increased dropout risk [6].

Trauma, mental health, and academic impact

The intersection of basic needs insecurity with trauma history creates particularly complex challenges for foster youth in higher education [7]. A significant number of youth in foster care have experienced devastating events, such as abuse, neglect, family separation, and multiple placement disruptions. These experiences create lasting neurobiological changes that affect stress response, emotional regulation, and cognitive processing.

Recent research conducted by Dr. Carla Lietz [7] on mental health needs among college students with foster care backgrounds reveals that traditional mental health services often fail to address the unique presentation of trauma symptoms in this population [7]. Students exposed to adversity may demonstrate hypervigilant states, wherein heightened alertness and sensitivity to perceived threats render classroom environments emotionally unsafe and impede engagement in learning tasks [8]. Additionally, attachment-

related challenges can complicate their ability to form and sustain healthy relationships with both faculty and peers, manifesting as difficulties with trust, boundary-setting, and emotional regulation. Furthermore, academic stressors that evoke memories of previous instability or traumatic experiences may elicit trauma responses, such as emotional dysregulation or withdrawal, which disrupt participation and cognitive functioning in school settings. The combination of current basic needs insecurity with historical trauma creates what researchers' term "re-traumatization" situations where current stressors activate past trauma responses in ways that overwhelm adaptive coping mechanisms. For foster youth experiencing housing instability, food insecurity, or financial crisis, these present challenges can trigger memories and emotional responses associated with childhood experiences of neglect, abandonment, or survival mode [7].

Identification and outreach challenges

Despite these programmatic innovations, a fundamental challenge remains in identifying and reaching foster youth on campus. Current research suggests that only approximately 39% of students with foster care backgrounds are identified by institutional systems, limiting the effectiveness of targeted outreach and support services.

The identification challenge stems from multiple factors. Many students choose not to disclose their foster care history due to stigma, privacy concerns, or past negative experiences with systems. Others may not recognize that their background qualifies them for specialized support, particularly if they experienced kinship care or other non-traditional foster arrangements. Additionally, institutional data collection systems often lack mechanisms for capturing this information in ways that enable proactive outreach while protecting student privacy.

Dr. Rashida Crutchfield's [9] research on foster youth in California's higher education system demonstrates that students who are identified and connected with specialized support services show significantly higher rates of academic persistence and degree completion. However, the benefits of these programs cannot reach students who remain invisible to institutional support systems [9].

Basic needs hubs and resource integration

Creating centralized basic needs hubs can significantly improve access to essential resources while reducing stigma and bureaucratic barriers. These hubs should offer food pantries, emergency financial assistance, housing support, benefits enrolment services, and connections to community resources. The hub model recognizes that students experiencing one form of basic needs insecurity often face multiple related challenges requiring coordinated responses.

Washington State's basic needs hubs have demonstrated measurable improvements in student retention and academic performance among participating students. The success of this model stems from its integration of services, reduction of stigma through universal accessibility, and coordination with external agencies to maximize available resources.

Trauma-informed institutional practices

Implementing trauma-informed practices throughout institutions requires comprehensive staff training and cultural change that extends far beyond specialized support programs. Faculty should receive training in trauma-aware pedagogy that helps them recognize signs of distress, create safe classroom environments, and modify assignments or policies that may inadvertently retraumatize students with abuse or neglect histories.

Dr. Cathy Lietz's [7] research emphasizes that trauma-informed care requires understanding how childhood experiences affect adult learning, relationship formation, and stress responses. This understanding should inform everything from academic policies regarding attendance and late assignments to residence hall programming and student conduct processes [7].

Cross-sector partnerships and community integration

Foster youth success in higher education requires coordination between educational institutions and external support systems. Partnerships with child welfare agencies, housing organizations, healthcare providers, and community-based nonprofits can create continuity of care that extends beyond campus boundaries.

Organizations like A "Sense of Home", which provides furniture and household items to foster youth transitioning to independence, demonstrate how community partnerships can address practical needs that institutions may not be equipped to handle internally. Similarly, partnerships with local housing authorities, healthcare systems, and workforce development programs can create comprehensive support networks that address the multiple challenges foster youth face.

Institutional policy reform

Institutions should examine existing policies and procedures to identify barriers that disproportionately affect foster youth. Financial aid policies, housing requirements, academic standing standards, and student conduct procedures may inadvertently penalize students experiencing instability or trauma responses.

Policy reforms might include priority registration for foster youth to ensure access to required courses, flexible academic policies that account for trauma-related absences or performance fluctuations, and emergency aid funds that can be accessed quickly without extensive documentation requirements that may be difficult for foster youth to obtain.

Academic success indicators

Traditional academic metrics GPA, credit completion, retention, and graduation rates provide important baseline measures but may not fully capture the success of students who face extraordinary challenges. Institutions should disaggregate outcomes by student populations to identify disparities and track progress over time.

However, research conducted by The Hope Center at Temple University suggests that academic success measures should be contextualized within the broader challenges foster youth face. A student who maintains enrolment while experiencing housing

instability may demonstrate remarkable resilience that traditional metrics fail to capture. Evaluation frameworks should include intermediate outcomes such as course completion rates, academic skill development, and progress toward degree completion even when timelines extend beyond traditional four-year models [5].

Holistic well-being measures

Comprehensive evaluation should assess multiple domains of student well-being including basic needs security, mental health outcomes, social integration, and development of independent living skills. These measures recognize that student success encompasses more than academic achievement, particularly for populations who have experienced significant trauma and instability.

The Seita Scholars program evaluation provides a model for holistic outcome measurement, tracking indicators such as housing stability, food security, mental health service utilization, peer relationship development, and post-graduation life outcomes. This comprehensive approach demonstrates how specialized support programs can affect multiple aspects of student well-being while supporting academic success.

Long-term impact assessment

Research suggests that the benefits of comprehensive foster youth support extend far beyond immediate academic outcomes to affect long-term life trajectories including career development, family formation, and civic engagement. Institutions should develop mechanisms for tracking alumni outcomes and assessing the broader impact of support interventions.

Dr. Amy Dworsky's [6] longitudinal research demonstrates that foster youth who successfully complete higher education show dramatically improved outcomes across multiple life domains compared to those who do not access post-secondary education. These findings support arguments for institutional investment in comprehensive support programs as interventions that create lasting change extending far beyond individual student success [6].

Next steps

The crisis of basic needs insecurity among foster youth in higher education demands urgent, comprehensive institutional response. The statistics are clear: foster youth face dramatically higher rates of food insecurity, housing instability, financial hardship, and homelessness compared to their peers. However, these numbers represent more than policy problems they represent individual stories of resilience, determination, and potential that institutions have the opportunity and obligation to support.

Moving from access to equity requires recognizing that foster youth bring unique strengths forged through experiences of adversity, adaptation, and survival. These students demonstrate remarkable resilience, independence, and maturity that can enrich institutional communities when properly supported. However, realizing this potential requires institutions to move beyond traditional student support models toward comprehensive, trauma-informed approaches that address the intersectional nature of challenges foster youth face [10].

The evidence-based recommendations outlined in this article, including proactive identification systems, comprehensive campus support programs, basic needs hubs, trauma-informed institutional practices, cross-sector partnerships, and policy reform, represent achievable strategies that institutions can implement to create meaningful change. While comprehensive support requires significant investment, research consistently demonstrates that these investments yield substantial returns in terms of student success, institutional mission fulfilment, and broader social outcomes [11].

Perhaps most importantly, supporting the success of foster youth represents a moral imperative for institutions committed to educational equity and social justice. These students have already demonstrated extraordinary resilience by reaching higher education despite systemic barriers and childhood trauma. Institutional responsibility extends beyond providing access to ensuring the foundational security necessary for academic success and personal thriving.

By implementing comprehensive, trauma-informed support systems, institutions can transform the educational experiences of foster youth from stories of survival against the odds to narratives of thriving with appropriate support. This transformation benefits not only individual students but also strengthens institutions and communities by ensuring that the unique perspectives and strengths of foster youth contribute to our collective future.

The time for incremental change has passed. The crisis demands immediate, comprehensive institutional response guided by research evidence and informed by the voices of foster youth themselves. Only through such response can higher education fulfil its promise of opportunity and transformation for all students, regardless of their childhood experiences or current circumstances [11,12].

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