College Counseling & Foster Care: Bridging the Gaps to Improve Persistence

EBSCC 2025
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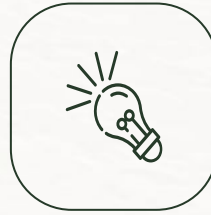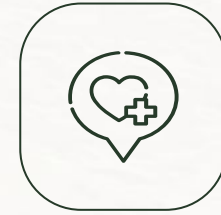
Session Objectives

Barriers

Understand **specific** and **interrelated** barriers that foster care alumni face in their college/career goals.

Strategies

Identify **concrete strategies** at **individual** and **systemic levels** that can be used to support foster care alumni.

Confidence

Increase **knowledge** and **confidence** in working with this high-needs, unique population.

Who are Foster Care Alumni (FCA)?

Foster Care Alumni (FCA) are youth transitioning from childhood <u>without</u> having been adopted or reunited with their families of origin.

(Leathers et al., 2020; Nathans & Chaffers, 2022)

Youth in Formal Foster Care: The Numbers

368,530

children/youth **living in foster care** in 2022.
24% are 14+ years old.
40% spend <1 year in foster care; for older youth, this may be longer.

3 in 1,000

children/youth **enter** foster care each year. This rate has been consistent for 2 decades.
19% are 14+ years old.

9%

of youth exiting foster care are **emancipated**. These youth are not reunited with family, adopted, or transferred to another placement.

56%

of fostered youth are **BIPOC**; Black and Indigenous youth continue to be overrepresented in foster care.

1/3

of youth experience **more than 2 placements per year**. In some states, over 51% of youth move placements at least three times in a year.

77%

of eligible youth age 14+ left foster care **without receiving the federally funded adulthood/independent living services** they are entitled to.

(Administration for Children & Families, 2024; Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2024)

Informal Foster Care

Also known as "hidden" foster care, these are situations where **youth are living with alternative caregivers** (such as siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles, friends, etc.) **without having passed through the foster care system**.

Because they are not "officially" in foster care, they **do not receive any benefits from the state**, nor do they have access to the social/financial capital of their family of origin.

Without documentation, it is **difficult to determine the number of youth in unofficial placements**—estimates suggest there are similar numbers of youth in official and unofficial placements (thus doubling the number of youth considered to be in foster care).

(Gupta-Kagan, 2020)

Emancipation: Educational Outcomes

By age 21, the highest level of education students who emancipated from foster care in 2017 received was:

71% high school diploma or GED

4% vocational certificate or license

2% associate's degree

<1% bachelor's degree or higher

20% none of the above

(Kids Count Data Center, 2024)

Similar Aspirations, Unequal Outcomes

70-80% of FCA
wish to attend college

1-11% actually
graduate from college

(Beard & Gates, 2019; Gross et al., 2020)

Unequal Outcomes: Contributing Factors

01. Between housing instability, academic challenges, financial strains, and access to resources, FCA face a unique combination of challenges that may threaten their postsecondary goals.

02. They share a number of intersectional identities that can contribute to college going troubles, such as being first generation college students, low income, and/or Black/Indigenous/People of Color.

03. There is no point at which FCA are "free" from the barriers of their unique contexts—graduating from high school or entering college does not mean they have escaped all of the potential challenges.

04. While some of their challenges may be similar to other marginalized groups, the ways in which they overlap mean common solutions—such as academic-year housing, merit scholarships, or remedial coursework—are unable to fully address their needs.

(Dumais & Spence, 2021; Gross et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2023;Jones & Varga, 2021; Massachusetts Court Improvement Plan [Mass CIP], 2019; Watt & Faulkner, 2020)

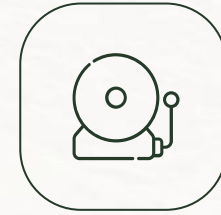# The Barriers: 3 General Categories

Basic Needs

Financial capital, occupational responsibilities, housing security, social-emotional, etc.
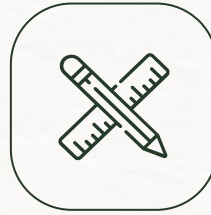
Academics

The relationship between placement stability and academic performance, placement issues, learning/mental health challenges, etc.

Transitions

Administrative challenges, summer melt, the impacts of transferring, etc.

Basic Needs: Financial & Shelter/Food

Every semester, students need to gather enough financial capital to pay for tuition, housing, food, transportation, books/materials, etc.
- **May vary by semester**: tuition increases, cost of living changes, different course requirements
- Financial aid **may not be able to cover the entire cost**

Many students will work outside of school to cover the remaining cost of their education. But…
- FCA are **more likely to work over 20 hours per week** outside of school
- The more students work, the more they **struggle to balance** occupational responsibilities and academics
- Students who work often **miss out** on campus community **events** or social **networks**, and may not be able to visit **campus support offices** if they work during normal business hours
- Even working full-time does not guarantee that they can afford school and survival

Additionally, a high number of FCA experience **housing insecurity** and **food insecurity**.
- Dorms & dining halls are often **closed over school breaks**; FCA do not have a "home base" they can rely on
- Off-campus housing can solve the break problem, but is **not always covered** by financial aid packages
- Many will get creative: sleep in cars, rely on shelters, couch surf, "double up" in dorm rooms, etc.—**unsustainable and unreliable**
- Food pantries can be difficult to find; some will opt to **skip meals** to afford things like supplies or rent

(Geiger et al., 2018; Horn, 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Skobba et al., 2018; Skobba et al., 2022; Watt et al., 2019)

Basic Needs: Social & Emotional

FCA may have experienced trauma, **regardless** of the circumstances of their removal from the home or the context of their placement(s).

- Related to abuse, neglect, chronic stress, parental struggles, etc.
- **Additional challenges stem from school changes, separation from siblings or friends**, etc.

Youth in foster care are **likely to develop mental health issues** at some point in their lives.

- Many face high rates of anxiety, depression, PTSD, or other disorders while enrolled in school

Those experiencing mental health issues, FCA or otherwise, **are at higher risk of dropping out**.

- They may also face high rates of unemployment, homelessness, drug abuse, or other health issues

(Martinez et al., 2020)

Basic Needs: Academics

⅓ of students in foster care will have **at least 2 different placements** in 12 months; this **may lead to disruptions or transfers between K-12 institutions**.

- More frequent school changes can contribute to **lower educational performance** for youth in foster care
- Students' **education may be disjointed,** as many schools may have different graduation requirements, move through content at different paces, have different course schedules, etc.
- Unless already identified or diagnosed, students who move around frequently **may not receive support** for learning disabilities, mental health challenges, or health difficulties.

A higher number of FCA:

- Are enrolled in **alternative schools** or lower-performing schools.
- **Dropout** of high school.
- Have not taken advanced coursework, may have gaps in their knowledge base, or may be **otherwise unprepared for college-level academics**.

There is a clear connection between having basic needs met and being able to engage in coursework—those entering foster care or in unofficial placements **may not be able to prioritize school**.

- Performance in high school clearly impacts college trajectories!

(AECF, 2024; Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens et al., 2016; Day et al., 2021; Liu, 2020; Martinez et al., 2020; Wiegmann et al., 2014)

Basic Needs: Transitions

Even the most motivated students can fall victim to the "**summer melt**"; anywhere from **10-40% of students** who intend to go to college ultimately do not attend in the fall.
- Most often BIPOC, first-generation, and low-income students

This "summer melt" looks different for every student: some may delay enrollment, others may end up enrolling at a different institution, or some do not enroll at all.
- For some students, barriers such as **confusing paperwork, hard deadlines, or surprise fees** contribute to this melt.

Based on their high school performance/experiences, some FCA are required to complete **remedial coursework** prior to their degree requirements.
- Ideally used to fill gaps in their knowledge base
- Can be **demoralizing** or **unmotivating**, especially if they must repeat remedial courses
- **Financial burden** of remediation: prolongs time to degree; harder to achieve "satisfactory academic progress" for financial aid.

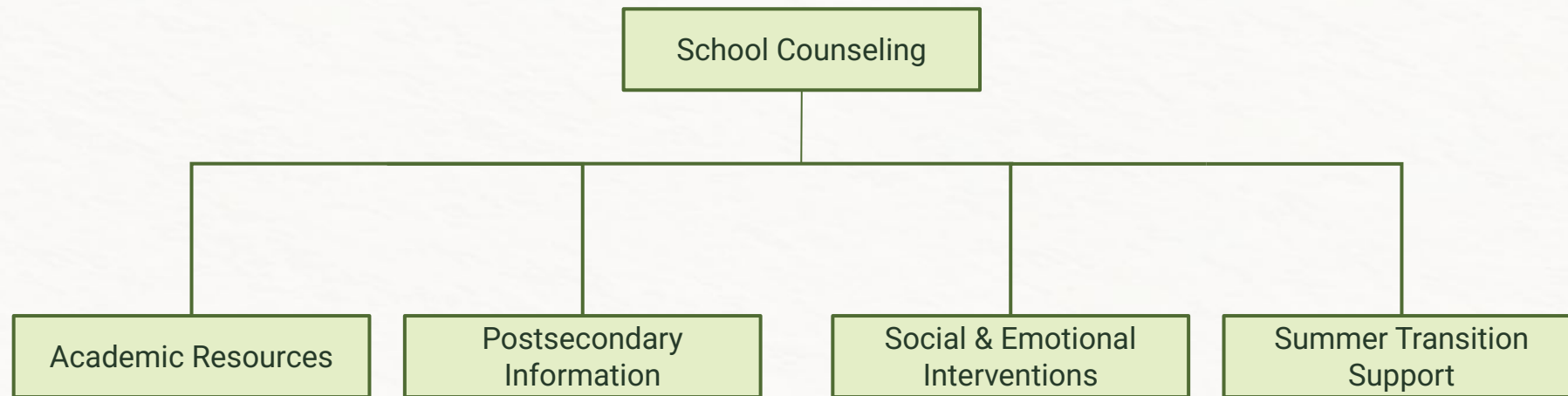**Transfering between institutions**, no matter their characteristics, **can threaten persistence** to a degree.
- Many FCA begin at 2-year colleges with the intent to transfer to a 4-year institution—largely due to financial capital or remediation
- Community colleges **do not have the same level of resources** that students can access: housing, social/emotional, or academic

(Castleman & Page, 2014; Day et al., 2021; Geiger et al., 2018; Gross et al., 2023; Havlicek, 2023; Liu, 2020; Rall, 2016; Skobba et al., 2022)

How Can School Counselors Support FCA?

FCA need additional support **beyond the standard** high school college counseling.

School counselors are well positioned to help students develop necessary skills and strategies to navigate the college going process.

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Academic Resources	Postsecondary Information	Social & Emotional Interventions	Summer Transition Support

We suggest that school counselors who use an **integrated systems-based approach** are better equipped to conceptualize and address the unique concerns of FCA during this key period.

Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE)

ASE Theory articulates how school counselors can use **relationships** and **networking** to influence the **interconnected systems** of students, school, families, community, and wider socio-political landscape. Counselors actively seek **student input** and highlight **student voice**.

Key Concepts:
- Goal is **equity** and **student agency**. Counselors seek to **empower students** to be their own advocates, with support.
- Recognize the **role of power dynamics** and hierarchies within and across systems.
- **Guided by the "5Cs"**: Curiosity, Connectedness, Co-Regulation, Compassion, and Contribution.

Through ASE, school counselors…
- Lead with **curiosity** and **compassion**.
- **Establish connections** amongst members of the community.
- Work to **align the environment with students** to support co-regulation.
- Contribute to **positive changes** in their schools, communities, and the world.

(Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024)

Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE)

ASE theory is **grounded in social justice**:
- **Advocate** for and **empower** students to tackle issues that disproportionately affect certain communities.
- Promote **fairness** and **equity** in school policies and practices.
- Consider the **larger social factors** impacting these policies.

School counselors focus on **developing student agency** and **self-advocacy** efforts:
- Create **opportunities** for students to **develop their capacities**.
- Expand their **critical consciousness**.
- **Address** oppressive structures.

(Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024)

Big Picture: What's Our Role?

Proxy Agents

We thoughtfully utilize our systemic power while balancing the needs/agency of students.

Supporters of Development

We support students in the development of critical consciousness about the systemic and institutional barriers at play.

Advocates

We uplift marginalized voices and advocate for the community where they cannot advocate for themselves.

Collaborators

We work with students/colleagues to identify solutions that address complex opportunity gaps.

Info Gatherers

We seek to understand students' needs to assess whether interventions are (or are not) serving them.

Agents of Curiosity

We lean into curiosity to better understand the big picture for students. We ask the "hard questions" about familial support, resources, plans, etc.

(Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024)

Student Level: One-on-One

Be **curious**, and **try to get the full picture**. Once you have an understanding of the scope of student's resources/barriers, we can better connect them to the right support.

Encourage students to **rely on school resources** and their **social networks**. Friends, former foster parents, college deans, disability services, residence life, etc. are all here to support students when they ask!

Cultivate critical consciousness with students, so that they can anticipate potential roadblocks and be proactive about navigating these challenges.

Collaborate with students to find solutions to their complex opportunity gaps. Search for postsecondary **options that meet both their needs, and their aspirations**. Search together for outside resources.

Help students develop **self-advocacy skills**, **build personal agency**, and **cultivate self efficacy**. All of these skills/competencies are relevant for high school and beyond.

Explicitly teach or review skills related to **executive functioning** or **social-emotional skills** to support traumatized youth in mastering these necessary foundations before adulthood.

(Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Day et al., 2021; Durlak, et al., 2024; Geiger et al., 2018; Jones & Bubb, 2021; Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Millett et al., 2018; Pace et al., 2018; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018; Singh et al., 2010; Skobba et al., 2022)

Student Level: Groups

Connect FCA to other FCA; it can be helpful to be surrounded by peers who are **navigating similar challenges**.

If you have a high number of FCA in your school, consider creating an **affinity group** or **counseling group**, depending on their needs.

If you can access them, **connect older FCA to younger ones**; this **mentorship** can help students through these barriers while supporting older students in developing leadership skills.

With any marginalized group, **collective agency is powerful**. Consider finding ways to bring these students together to empower them and facilitate this type of agency.

(Beasley et al., 2024; Burton et al., 2021; Clemens et al., 2017; Destin et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Hagler et al., 2024; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024)

Classroom/Teacher Level

School counselors have **unique knowledge** of students' situations or needs; with this, we can **advocate** for students' needs in the classroom and **work with teachers** to understand where students may need additional support in **skillbuilding**.

Teachers do not have the same training as school counselors; we can **support teachers** as they develop a **trauma-informed lens** to their teaching, and encourage teachers to **explicitly develop students' executive functioning skills** in the classroom.

(Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018)

Whole-School Level: Systemic Resources

School counselors are **proxy agents**; it's our job to **advocate for** resources to help students through this transition.

Systemic changes can support students' academic performance (and thus, their access to resources): advisory periods, after school study spaces, and study halls can all **help students complete homework, assignments, or applications**.

- **Access** to teachers, technology, and information can also be particularly useful.
- **Work-study programs** can give students who work outside of school the opportunity to earn high school credit for their time.

Proactive **summer office hours** can help decrease summer melt rates, as students can ask **questions** or receive **guidance** in the period between graduation and matriculation.

(Avery et al., 2021; Bowen et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2022; Castleman et al., 2014; Clemens et al., 2017; Day et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2024; Havlicek, 2023; Jones & Varga, 2021; Kern, 2022; Kim et al., 2019; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Liu, 2020; Millett et al., 2018; Seligman, 2015; Skobba et al., 2022)

Whole-School Level: School Culture

We can **shift the culture** via school-wide programs or messaging: **all students can succeed**, note the impact of **trauma**, support social-emotional **skill development**, foster **compassion** and **respect** for all people, and promote the **wellbeing** of everyone in the school.

Develop & promote a "**college-going culture**," wherein all students are recognized as having the potential to succeed in college. Counselors can be a positive voice of support, especially for marginalized students who may not otherwise engage in these college-related activities.

(Avery et al., 2021; Bowen et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2022; Castleman et al., 2014; Clemens et al., 2017; Day et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2024; Havlicek, 2023; Jones & Varga, 2021; Kern, 2022; Kim et al., 2019; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Liu, 2020; Millett et al., 2018; Seligman, 2015; Skobba et al., 2022)

School-Family-Community Partnership Level

During any transition (between high schools, from high school to postsecondary, etc.), **collaborate** with your students' **caregivers** and your **colleagues**:

- **Teachers** are instrumental in **placement decisions**, as they can more easily **assess for knowledge gaps** and make an accurate decision in their content area to support student learning.
- Many adults or caregivers can **help facilitate their transition to college**: foster parents/guardians, siblings, caseworkers, Independent Living Coordinators, teachers, etc.

Develop students' **awareness** of the multiple **systems of support** available to them: Student Deans, mental health services, learning disability services, residence life, former foster parents, extended family members, friends, etc.

- It's not enough to know that they exist—students need to know how to **access** these official resources.
- Some students may need encouragement reaching out to their support networks during crises or college breaks.

(Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Clemens et al., 2018; Curry & Milsom, 2021; Day et al., 2021; Hines et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Liu, 2020; Millett et al., 2018; Nathans & Chaffers, 2022; Pace et al., 2018; Sugizaki & Iida, 2023; What Works Clearinghouse, 2022)

Political/Social Advocacy Level

Schools do not operate in a vacuum; school counselors can be **stakeholders** in the larger community and advocate for broader legal, political, or social support for students.

Two key programs that counselors may advocate for that can support FCA:
- **Extended Foster Care**: A state-level program where students may remain in foster care through the age of 21 if they meet educational/occupational requirements.
  - *Allows FCA to delay elements of their independence, similar to their non-fostered peers.*
  - *Not all states offer extended foster care; many of those who do offer opt-in programs instead of opt-out programs.*
- **Education & Training Vouchers/Tuition Waivers**: Federal or state-level funding to promote access to educational/vocational experiences to prepare FCA for the workforce.
  - *Each state may distribute in their own way; not always equitable.*
  - *Often have eligibility requirements, applications, or GPA minimums.*

Political advocacy can help **shift the landscape** of the school environment, but it **may not always be feasible/safe**; in these cases, becoming a **member** of national organizations or **donating** to causes may be ways to advocate for change in a safer way.

(Gross et al., 2023; Hanson et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2019; Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Schaeffer, et al., 2010; Watt & Faulkner, 2020; Wiegmann et al., 2014)

Counselor Level: Self-Care

Our work is super important! That said, sometimes we need to remind ourselves:
- Doing this work **is not easy**. To be effective and maintain our equanimity, we need to set **measurable and achievable goals** for ourselves so we can remain **resilient** and push through the more difficult aspects of our job.
- We are **better able to support our students** when we are **able to support ourselves**; be sure to prioritize your own health/wellbeing, and practice self-compassion.
- When working through **barriers we cannot control**, self-care is **even more important**. This is also true in cases where we may not be able to see the ultimate outcome of our hard work.

Remember: **counselor burnout helps no one!**

Where might you already be doing this work?

Consider: similar populations, marginalized youth, BIPOC students, intersectional challenges, universal design, etc.

Who Else May Benefit from Tier 3 College Counseling?

Foster Care Alumni

First-Gen Students

Low-Income Families

Students with Special Needs

Students Experiencing Homelessness

And more...

Final Tips & Takeaways

This may be a small population, but the work we do to support FCA can also support students who are first-gen, low-income, BIPOC, unhoused, have special needs, etc.

Further intervention research is needed, and more evidence-based interventions need to be developed for the high school/college transition.

We cannot change everything! But we do have the power to collaborate, advocate, and educate ourselves.

It is insufficient to just open doors for students; we need to provide them with the resources they need to achieve their goals.
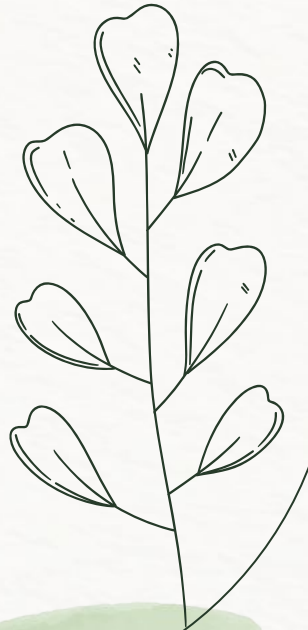
(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.; Whiston et al., 2011)

Want More Info? Read the Article!

https://openpublishing.library.umass.edu/cspec/article/id/2336/

Thank you!

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For a full list of references, please see our article on CSPEC: https://openpublishing.library.umass.edu/cspec/article/id/2336/

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EB

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