Increasing college access for youth aging out of foster care: Evaluation of a summer camp program for foster youth transitioning from high school to college

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ABSTRACT

Young people who transition from the foster care system face many challenges including lack of support and other educational barriers. They are less likely to graduate from high school than their counterparts and go on to college yet despite challenges, many succeed and take advantage of higher education programs.

In Michigan, a state with one of the highest percentage of youth in foster care, Michigan State University developed a small scale, targeted intervention to help transitioning foster youth achieve their goals of pursuing higher education. Led by the School of Social Work in collaboration with other colleges and disciplines, it was demonstrated that a campus based learning program for transitioning foster youth can help contribute toward a perceived increase in knowledge and information about college life, funding and admissions procedures. The educational process involved peer support, role modeling, mentoring and active learning sessions led by the faculty and students who were often foster care alumni themselves. Leaders and speakers came from a range of disciplines, institutions and organizations. This approach and curriculum contributed to perceptions of the camp as enhancing life skills, self-concept, empowerment and sense of purpose. Consequently, this program contributed to the resilience of those who attended and potentially helped build steps from care to higher education.

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"I feel that not only did I have a better sense of what college life might be like, I actually felt like a student while I was going (to the program) here. ..I felt like we were on the same schedule as students.." — 16 year old foster care camp participant talking about participation in the Michigan State University program that helped prepare foster youth to take advantage of higher education opportunities.

1. Introduction

According to the Federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, approximately 29,516 youth aged out of the foster care system in the US during 2008 (McCoy, Freundlich, & Ross, 2010). Many foster youth transition out of the foster care system with few, if any, financial resources; limited education, training, and employment options; no safe place to live; and with little or no support from family,

friends, and the community; making them particularly vulnerable to negative social outcomes such as jail, homelessness, unemployment, teen pregnancy and parenthood (Atkinson, 2008; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney et al., 2007; Fowler, Toro, Tompsett, & Hobden, 2006; Reilly, 2003; Shirk & Stangler, 2004). This sizeable population faces considerable educational disparities and inequities in college access. The focus here is on a small-scale intervention in one state that was developed to help tackle some of these educational challenges.

1.1. Educational challenges faced by transitioning foster youth

Foster care youth face major educational challenges, including school instability and overrepresentation in special education programs. Nearly half (45%) of foster children between 6th and 8th grades were classified as eligible for special education compared to 16% of students who have never been in foster care (Macomber, 2009). On average, youth move to new foster care placements up to three times per year, with each move resulting in a change of school (Julianelle, 2008; McNaught, 2009). Students lose four to six months of educational progress each time they change schools due to poor coordination between child welfare and school personnel, compounded by difficulties transferring school records and course credits from prior schools often resulting in the repetition of courses and grade levels (McNaught, 2009). Consequently, many foster care youth

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fall behind their peers and drop out of school. Between 54 and 58% of former foster youth graduate from high school by age 19 (Benedetto, 2005) compared to 87% of students in the general population (Courtney, 2009).

The foster care system does not prepare transitioning youth adequately for independent living, including access to and readiness for higher education (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Access to post-secondary education is often a key to future success by increasing opportunities for meaningful, stable employment and increased income (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Yet, Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) identified academic preparation for foster youth as a major unmet need. Like other young people, the majority of foster youth aspire toward a college education, yet they have many more challenges to overcome (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009). Over 70% of youth in foster care aged 15 to 19 years reported a desire to go to college, and an additional 19% reported a desire to attend graduate school (Tzawa-Hayden, 2004). Yet despite high aspirations, foster care youth are underrepresented among college going populations (Courtney, 2009). At age 19, only 18% of foster youth are pursuing a four-year degree, compared to 62% of their peers (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009).

Unfortunately, many youth are on their own when it comes to patching together the financial resources to pay for college, and many flounder because they lack emotional support in addition to a place to spend school breaks and holidays. Even the most talented youth may not know about financial aid resources, procedures, and eligibility criteria, and will not apply to college because it is assumed to be out of reach financially. Research demonstrates that foster youth experience more educational disruption and challenges and are less likely to attend college and then go on to graduate even if they successfully complete high school (Barth, 1990; Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2007, 2009, 2005; Festinger, 1983; Kessler, 2004; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Scannapieco, Schagrin, & Scannapieco, 1995).

Foster youth are further challenged by low expectations for their future potential; extra support can really make a difference.

1.2. Overcoming challenges: Resilience

Despite severe and chronic adversities, some foster care youth overcome challenges related to pursuing higher education and therefore show resilience. Resilience is a positive adaptation where difficulties – personal, familial, or environmental – are so extreme that society would expect a person's cognitive or functional abilities to be impaired (Day, 2006).

Research has shown that individual, family, and neighborhood components interact to help make young people resilient (Condly, 2006). Protective characteristics such as strong parenting and stable care are generally not available to youth in foster care. Most children raised by their birth families have built-in, lifelong support networks of parents, siblings, extended family, and family friends—networks that are not ensured for youth who have spent time in the foster care system. Other relevant protective factors have been identified, including having external support systems that reinforce competence, positive values and enhance self-esteem. Social support is itself a complex and multidimensional construct that is defined by Dunst, Trivette, and Deal (1988: page 3) as *"the emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental and material assistance provided by others to either maintain well-being or promote adaptations to difficult life events"* (p. 3). It has specific and distinct effects on the coping and well-being of individuals as the events of their lives unfold, particularly on how stressful life events like transitions are managed (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Kirk, 2003). The relevance of social support for transitioning foster youth was highlighted by Metzger (2008) who described the value of various types of support in the development of resilience among foster youth. Training, services, positive supportive

networks, and job experience while in care are all associated with more positive adjustments (Reilly, 2003).

Also important for resilience are a number of personal skills such as problem-solving and planning abilities, manifest competence perceived efficacy, identification with competent role models, and having aspirations (Day, 2006; Garmezy, 1994; Masten, 2001; Werner, 1989, 2000).

1.3. Legal and policy responses to increase support for transitioning foster youth

There is an urgent need in Michigan, and other states, to contribute more creatively and collaboratively to the resilience of youth transitioning from foster care (Macomber et al., 2008). An amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act by the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 (Public Law 106–169) created the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), which doubled federal funding for Independent Living Services implemented under FCIA to $140 million. An amendment to the FCIA, the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act of 2001, appropriated an additional $60 million for education and training vouchers of up to $5000 per year for youth up to age 23 years who were interested in pursuing their post-secondary education goals. Most recently, the Fostering Connections to Success Act was signed into law in 2008, allowing states to provide care and support to youth in foster care up to the age of 21 provided that the youth complete high school or its equivalent and enroll in post secondary education (or vocational program) among other criteria (Courtney, 2009).

2. A preparatory initiative for higher education for Michigan's transitioning foster care youth

In 2008, there were nearly 18,000 children and youth residing in Michigan's foster care system (According to a report prepared for the Michigan Department of Human Services, in 2008 there were Child Welfare Resource Center, School of Social Work, Michigan State University, 2009). Through no fault of their own, they were separated from their birth parents for a range of complex, inter-related reasons including abuse, neglect, incarceration or death of a parent, poverty and homelessness.

In Michigan, a state with one of the highest populations of foster care youth in the country and the majority of foster care residents located around the city of Detroit, a responsive initiative was developed by Michigan State University (MSU) for youth interested in finding out more about the realities and processes around obtaining a higher education credential.

2.1. Program background

This program, the Michigan Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care (MEOYIC), began in 2008 as a short, three-day residential camp program on MSU campus for foster youth transitioning out of the system. It offered social, personal and informational support within a learning campus environment to promote resilience, and prepare youth for transition from high school to college. Environmental characteristics included elements defined in a framework developed by the National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (NRCIM) (2002) that categorized program components of a well-designed youth program to promote the developmental needs and well being of the young people in attendance. The MSU program aimed to take place in a safe and secure environment with appropriate structure, supportive relationships with staff and counselors, opportunities to belong and develop self-efficacy, build skills, and promote positive social norms. Foster care alumni who received stipends from the University to work as camp counselors primarily staffed this experiential learning program. There were 15 counselors (all undergraduate students enrolled at Michigan State University) over the two years (seven and eight each year, respectively). The diversity of

counselors in terms of race and ethnicity more closely matches the composition of the foster care youth served from year one to year two of the camp when 71% reported that they were African American or mixed race. This combination closely matched the mix of diversity among participants in both years. All but one (88%) of the 2009 enrolled student counselors were foster care alumni, an increase from 29% the year before. In 2008 counselors, like participants, were equally made up of male and female members. In 2009, this had changed with 83% (5) female and 17% (1) male. The makeup of camp counselors in the second year changed to more closely reflect the makeup of the high school students who were registered to participate in the summer camp program.

Referrals were made through contacts with public and private child welfare agencies. Partnerships were also built with community organizations such as not-for-profit youth serving agencies and the University Extension office. Organizers envisioned this program would develop coherently into a broader system that networked with other higher education institutions and public and private child welfare agencies in Michigan. As an annual program, it has run three times, for three days and two nights in 2008 and 2009 and for four days and three nights in 2010 on the campus of MSU, during the summer semester. Participants were accommodated with on-campus housing and provided meals in a student-dining hall. Classes and meetings were held in MSU lecture theaters and technology labs. Campus health services, student support services and recreation facilities were accessed as required. An expansion of ongoing peer and mentoring support emerged in the second year along with greater inter-departmental collaboration at the University. Three of the counselors in the second year of the program were earning college credits for service learning as an integral component of the MSU foster youth alumni services program for enrolled foster care alumni.

3. Program evaluation

Evaluation of the camp was viewed as an integral and important component of the initiative for program improvement, to engage future partners and seek future funding, to inform future development in practice and policy and to build baseline research data for longitudinal follow-up. This paper refers to aspects of both the process and the outcome evaluation for the first two years of camp beginning in the summer of 2008 and ending in the fall of 2009.

3.1. Evaluation design

A mixed method, short-term longitudinal evaluation design comprising process and outcome components was used to assess processes and perceived outcomes related to the content of the curriculum, self-efficacy, skills, attitudes and program quality. An independent evaluator worked collaboratively with program faculty, volunteers and staff to implement it.

3.2. Process evaluation

There were two process evaluation components. The first included semi-structured interviews with coordinators about background, organization, participant and counselor recruitment, and curriculum development and delivery. In 2008, the primary coordinator was interviewed in-person, a week after camp had ended for approximately an hour using a semi-structured interview guide on the history and her views about program improvement. In 2009, this was extended to include telephone interviews with 2 other coordinators who were involved in organization and present for most of the camp. The second component comprised focus groups held at the end of each camp to assess the contributions of the camp toward foster youth resilience in terms of perceptions of support and identification with a positive role model provided by the camp counselors and staff

and attitudes concerning the content and delivery of the curriculum. In 2008, three focus groups lasting approximately 40 min each were conducted with 14 camp participants distributed relatively equally across each group with an experienced leader who was familiar with the client group and curriculum. Each group also included a note-taker and facilitator who were foster care alumni and/or camp counselors. In 2009, focus groups were constructed similarly, although there were two larger groups this time, with ten camp participants in each group. Members were led through an informal discussion of camp curriculum content, the delivery style of presenters, intended use of resource materials, views about on-site facilities and perceptions of counselor and staff support.

The contents of the focus groups and interviews with the coordinators were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and then thematically analyzed by the evaluator in consultation with camp staff. Data was used to inform program improvement, contribute to accountability in a final report to funders and served to triangulate quantitative data collected from self-report questionnaires on perceived outcomes. Focus group data was also used to illustrate, add depth and explore some aspects of the program in more detail.

3.3. Outcome evaluation

Participants completed a pre-post questionnaire developed by the National Service Learning Commission to collect demographic information, aspirations for higher education and changes in attitudes toward education. In addition, participants were also asked at the end of the camp to complete a longer retrospective questionnaire, Michigan Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care Questionnaire (MEOYICQ), to assess changes in perceptions of a number of personal skills that have been shown to contribute to resilience, particularly among transitioning foster youth, such as problem-solving, planning, perceived self-efficacy, and aspirations. As there was no pre-existing standardized instrument to measure the desired outcomes of this program, a self-report questionnaire (MEOYICQ) was developed to broadly encompass camp goals. It included a number of items developed by The Colorado Trust (2004) to measure changes in 'Sense of Self ' (see Table 4—a six-item sub-scale, measuring perceptions of self-concept, positive outlook and perceptions of empowerment and purpose), perceptions of increased knowledge and information (see Table 2) and perceptions of improved life skills (see Table 3).

To avoid over-burdening participants, potentially undermining self-confidence or inhibiting building open and trusting relationships between leaders and participants, this survey questionnaire was designed to be administered retrospectively at the close of the residential initiative and then again during follow-up sessions, three months later.

3.4. Sample

The sample was made up of 38 young people (18 in 2008 and 20 in 2009) aged 15 to 19 years who participated in the camp and were currently or had been in foster care and were still involved with the child welfare system in Michigan.

In the first year, one camp participant declined to participate in the evaluation and two others left the program early due to transportation issues with referring agencies before all questionnaires were completed and focus groups conducted.

A group of participants were included in follow-up three months after the program ended. Although follow-up programming was available to all participants, efforts to engage 11 of the youth were unsuccessful and contact with them is unknown since they had either left care, changed social workers, moved, or had caseworkers or foster parents who didn't allow the young person to participate in follow-up activities.

3.5. Limitations of the evaluation

Limitations of the evaluation included the participant sample selection. Although recruitment was intended to be widely inclusive of young people in foster care across the state of Michigan, the sample was selective since this depended on a complex number of inter-related factors including aims and purpose of the referring agency, awareness of the MEOYIC program, the availability, expectations and motivation of the youth, their case workers, funding, transportation, etc. The follow-up sample was even more self-selecting, likely comprising the most highly motivated youth and reinforcing the importance that results cannot be generalized to the wider population of foster youth or all of those transitioning out of care.

A number of other limitations to the causality of outcomes and generalization of findings were imposed by the scope and design of the evaluation method. These included the relatively small and selective number of high school aged participants, reliance on self-report measures of perception rather than observation or, other objective measures and the absence of an experimental design. Ideally, a more expansive and rigorous study would be advantageous, however, perceptions of support and change in both self-report measures and focus groups triangulated and strengthened the reliability and validity of these perceptions. These perceptions reflected the opinions of the youth and were therefore important in their own right.

3.6. Results

3.6.1. Demographics

A majority (72%) of participants lived in one of the most economically disadvantaged counties (Wayne) and cities (Detroit) in the state (Kids Count, MI, 2009). Most were young people of color; 62% identified themselves as African–American, 17% were bi- or multi-racial, 9% were Hispanic, 3% were Native American and the remaining 9% were white. It was not surprising that the majority of the participants were African–American since they are over-represented in the foster care population (Knott & Donovan, 2010). There was 70% female participation over both years. In 2008, participants were equally made up of male and female members. This changed considerably in 2009, as 90% (18) of participants were female. This may have been due in part to one of the program's funders who was focused exclusively on serving young women.

3.6.2. Emerging themes from focus groups

Dominant themes that emerged from focus groups highlighted camp components that were viewed as most important and shaped the framework for the results that follow (see Table 1).

3.6.3. Personal and educational development outcomes: Perceptions of an increase in information and knowledge about higher education

The delivery of information and knowledge within the campus setting was integral to the MSU program. Participants perceived that they had acquired a range of new learning about the practicalities of higher education that resulted from the camp. Scores for each item were derived from a Likert scale that assessed whether or not there was an agreement with a statement about perceived learning on each of the topics included in the camp curriculum, such as "This program has helped me learn about how to maximize grants to help me go to college", where 1 = 'No', 2 = 'Not really', 3 = 'Don't know', 4 = 'Somewhat' and 5 = 'Yes'.

As the program ended, participants reported that they perceived learning most about 'campus life' and 'scholarships for college'. To assess the sustainability of these perceived gains in knowledge, participants were asked to report using the same set of questions again after three months. At follow-up, participants again reported that perceptions of 'campus life' and 'maximizing grants to enable attendance at college' remained among those identified as having perceptually increased the most. Generally, in the medium term, perceptions of the knowledge learned at camp showed a pattern of reducing only slightly among this group of motivated participants. Means and standard deviations are reported for each indicator in Table 2. Tests for significance were not run due to the small size and selectivity of the follow-up sample. Findings are illustrated in Table 2.

> *"..I learned how to get money, — a lot of scholarships and getting money for books and how to pay for room and food and all the stuff you need, like, that's so important."* Janice, a 19-year-old female camp member commented on her views about the value of some of the financial aspects of the camp curriculum.

Review of survey items on finance-related outcomes such as perceptions of being informed about scholarships, reducing college debt, and maximizing grants were all perceived by participants in both years as having increased. Access to financial resources and management were also brought up in focus groups where hands-on skill development sessions on money management were often singled out for their perceived value. A study of transitioning foster youth found that financial skills training is vital for youth themselves but also for foster parents to enable them to help young people in their care as they move on into the adult world. (McMillen and Tucker, 1997). The comment below supported their findings on the need for

Table 1
Themes that emerged from focus group participants.

Overarching theme	Sub-theme
1. Personal and educational development	Making information and knowledge available e.g. about grants and scholarships, providing a 'resource file' Life skills e.g. managing money, planning Sense of Self e.g. empowerment
2. Experiential learning and engagement	Inter-active, task centered teaching styles Campus location Presentations by foster care alumni
3. Leadership by foster care alumni	Extending support networks in the community and with MSU Positive role models e.g. Leadership in staffing, organization, presentation, demonstrating confidence, skills, abilities and knowledge, positive life outcomes despite a poor start.

Table 2
Reported perceptions of changes in information and knowledge about higher education that resulted from the camp.

Information and knowledge This program has helped me learn about.....	End of camp Mean (standard deviation) (N=34)	Follow-up (3 months later) Mean (standard deviation) (N=23)
Computers on campus	4.15 (1.38)	4.26 (1.21)
Campus facilities	4.5 (0.9)	4.7 (0.56)
Maximizing college grants	4.65 (0.92)	4.83 (0.49)
Federal Work Study awards	4.44 (1.19)	4.65 (0.57)
College scholarships	4.88 (0.33)	4.65 (0.71)
Reducing college debts	4.82 (0.72)	4.57 (0.66)
Course choices	4.79 (0.48)	4.7 (0.56)
Career choices	4.76 (0.65)	4.43 (1.16)
Room-mate issues	4.68 (0.91)	4.57 (0.79)
'Campus life'	4.91 (0.29)	4.78 (0.52)

financial training for foster youth and highlighted this gap in foster parent support.

> *".. Everybody was interacting. We had to make out the budget plan and we had to keep going over it because, you know, we were over budget … and the (foster) home I'm at, they had no idea basically about managing money."* Jules, a camp participant in 2009 talked about the inter-active camp session that was held on budgeting and pointed out that she did not get that kind of financial support in her foster home.

3.6.4. Developmental outcomes: Perceptions of enhanced life skills

> *"I listened to everything that everybody said—how they talked, you know, so I listened. That's one thing I do. I talk a lot but I listen as well".* In 2009, Jay who attended camp in 2009 commented on his increased awareness of his own skills in listening.

The possession of a number of personal attributes and skills including problem-solving and planning abilities were identified earlier in the literature as critical to the development of resilience and so perceptions of change in these areas were measured. These pro-social personal skills and others such as taking responsibility for actions, decision-making, listening, self-expression, assertiveness, goal-setting and money management were perceived by participants as positively influenced by the program. Participants were asked how much they agreed with statements about a number of life skills. Responses were given using a Likert scale design where 1 = 'No', 2 = 'Not really', 3 = 'Don't know', 4 = 'Somewhat' and 5 = 'Yes'. Results from the survey are depicted using means and standard deviations (see Table 3). Participants at the close of the program and at follow-up reported that the program had the greatest impact when they perceived that they took responsibility for their own actions. It was also found that participants reported a perceived growth in a wide range of like skills. The perceived increases reported were greatest in the areas of taking responsibility for their own actions, forward planning, decision-making, and time management. Perceptions of changes in money management skills were reported to have had the least impact over time. Although sample selection, other intervening life experiences and maturation have to be taken into account, after 3 months participants still reported the largest perceived life skill

change to be the same as reported right after the camp ended. This was *'taking responsibility for his/her own actions'*, followed by perceptions of change in *'setting personal goals'*.

3.6.5. Developmental outcomes: Enhanced self-concept, empowerment and sense of purpose

> *"I believe in me!"* Sonya attended the camp in 2008, and exclaimed in an open-ended question to the changes she felt had resulted from her camp experience.

Because many foster youth suffer from poor self-image (Ashford, LeCroy, & Lortie, 2009), the delivery and organization of the summer camp curriculum aimed to strengthen the participants' views of themselves and their capabilities. To assess this, a number of items were included in the MEOYICQ to target reports by participants about perceptions of change in areas of personal efficacy and self-esteem. A sub-scale, "Sense of Self", was built into the survey with items measuring self-concept (self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth), empowerment, positive outlook, and sense of purpose (The Colorado Trust, 2004). The results are shown in Table 4 and include perceptions recorded at the conclusion of the program and in the medium term, where participants reported perceptions of enhanced senses of self, felt more competent and were more optimistic about their future.

In a focus group, Shanya (17 years), was supported by other foster care alumni when she talked about her personal experience of the camp where she thought it brought college life into reality but in a context she found supportive. Other foster care alumni who were either facing or had overcome many of the barriers she had faced surrounded her. Shanya enthusiastically told others:

> *"I felt like I was a college student. I felt like I was really here. Not a lot of people know what it feels like to be in situations that we've been through and just me being here has helped me a lot."*

3.6.6. Experiential learning and engagement

A number of organizational components influenced outcomes. One of these included the style of delivery used by presenters and the extent to which they were able to engage this group of youth.

One of the youth, Jason (18 years), who attended the camp in 2009 talked in a focus group about the importance of the way information was communicated to the group and that his recall of the

Table 3
Reported perceptions of change in life skills that resulted from the camp.

Life skills I have become better at…	End of camp Mean (standard deviation) N = 34	Follow-up (3 months later) Mean (standard deviation) N = 23
Taking responsibility for my actions	4.79 (0.48)	4.83 (0.65)
Setting goals	4.71 (0.68)	4.74 (0.69)
Listening to people	4.68 (0.64)	4.61 (0.72)
Telling others about my ideas and feelings	4.56 (0.93)	4.57 (1.16)
Standing up for what I believe	4.5 (1.05)	4.57 (1.08)
Making decisions	4.76 (0.43)	4.52 (0.95)
Time management	4.76 (0.50)	4.43 (1.04)
Money management	4.41 (0.96)	4.39 (1.03)
Solving problems	4.47 (1.08)	4.26 (0.91)
Planning ahead	4.76 (0.43)	4.54 (0.94)

Table 4
Reported perceptions of change in 'Sense of Self' that resulted from the camp.

Sense of Self Coming to this program has helped me to…..	End of camp Mean (standard deviation) N = 34	Follow-up (3 months later) Mean (standard deviation) N = 23
Feel better about myself	4.65 (0.81)	4.70 (0.88)
Feel I have more control over things that happen to me	4.56 (0.86)	4.52 (0.90)
Feel that I can make more of a difference	4.76 (0.5)	4.87 (0.34)
Learn that I can do things I didn't think I could do before	4.76 (0.55)	4.78 (0.52)
Feel better about my future	4.82 (0.46)	4.74 (0.54)
Feel I am better at handling whatever comes my way	4.56 (0.82)	4.48 (0.85)

content of this session was clearer than that of didactic presentations. Jason added:

> *"Yeah, that was actually interesting 'cause he [the admissions counselor] used props and stuff too, and he was really dramatic into it, like he motioned and he was loud and he kept us going. He definitely kept people awake and into it".*

Jason was not alone in highlighting the value of an interactive, practical approach to learning. Other youth and counselors also raised this issue, particularly when a 'real-life' product, or activities, such as preparing a resume or completing a college application were end results.

In particular, the preparation and role modeling for a 'mock' interview stood out for many youth and probably contributed to perceptions of the development of new life skills that prepared the youth for the adult world of higher education and employment. This was reinforced by the comment made by Shari, a 2009 participant who shared that she had lost a job because she did not know what a resume was:

> *"When I was trying to look for jobs, there was one job I could have gotten except that I had to write a resume and I had no idea what it was. And they needed, like, somebody to work, but I didn't know what it was, so I didn't apply for it".*

Counselors also appeared to support an increase in hands-on learning and their involvement in this. Tara, a 21-year old foster care alumnus and counselor in 2009 suggested:

> *"..Teach the counselors how to teach the kids, or you know, everybody get familiar with it and then help them sit down at a computer and say, you know, let me help you fill out the (admission) application."*

3.6.7. Leadership by foster care alumni: Role-modeling

> *" I actually hate when people say, 'oh I understand what you've been through'—and you haven't been through the same situation or something similar to that. And, like, with my counselors, me and a couple other girls got the chance, you know, to share our stories with one of our counselors.., and I thought it was just, like, so awesome that we all, like, had something in common."* Shanya, an attendee at the camp in 2009, told the group that she found it really helped her build relationships and feel more confident after she discovered that her peers and her counselor shared common early experiences of being in foster care.

The positive impact of having foster care alumni in key roles from camp organization through leadership roles as camp counselors and in giving presentations was positively discussed frequently in focus groups.

Keynote speakers in both years had been in foster care and talked about challenges overcome and current successes. Many of the young people saw this presentation as one of the highlights of the camp. The quotes below illustrate this:

> 1. *"…maybe we can because I thought I had a worse life. She had it bad, and I'm like, well she had it like that, then I could get through it then 'cause she got through it too. So it, like, really motivated me to just stop treating myself as the victim and just take charge of my life"* Joachim, aged 17 years, who attended camp in 2009 talked about how the keynote speaker had empowered him.
>
> 2. *"I really didn't expect to hear anything like that, she went through so much in her life and she actually learned to take a step forward and put all the drama behind her."* Jules, aged 16 years, was impressed by the speaker's ability to move on and become successful, despite early hardships. (Camp participant, summer 2008).

The program also included sessions from visiting foster care alumni enrolled in other universities and community colleges. Youth said they felt motivated and believed that their higher education goals were attainable or helped them build new aspirations to pursue higher education.

The value of having camp counselors with a foster care background contributed to the perceived positive influences of the camp as the comments from three participants in 2009 below helped show:

> 1. *"I look at Sean (a counselor)… because he went through the same stuff we went through and he goes to Michigan State (University), you know, and I'm like, 'wow'. You know, like, he does real good. He's survivin' so I kind of admire him for that."*
>
> 2. *"Like, I would have never known that you, or you (were) in foster care. That's giving me confidence and giving other people confidence".*
>
> 3. *"It's like, 'I can do it if she can do it.' I know I can do it. She went through the same thing: And then you know that they have succeeded".*

4. Program improvement

The evaluation impacted a wide range of program improvements such as improved preparation and training for counselors, coordinators and speakers. Also, in its' second year, MEOYIC extended direct links with service learning opportunities offered through the MSU Foster Youth Alumni Services Mentoring Program. This systemic link resulted in an increase of counselors with a foster care background and an expansion of their roles, with new responsibilities for mentoring including maintaining contact with high school aged participants and, for those engaged in service learning, a credit option. A development instituted by the college-going foster care alumni after the conclusion of camp in the summer of 2009 was the use of web-based social media. The use of personalized web sites and blogs

has potential for developing positive connections between youth and adults (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010). Electronic access to an informal support network can serve to counteract the lack of access to informal supports in the participants' primary community of residence.

5. Discussion

5.1. Promising practices

This small-scale collaborative intervention (MEOYIC) at MSU demonstrated that a campus based experiential learning program for transitioning foster youth can improve participant perceptions of educational and developmental outcomes. It can, for example, contribute toward a perceived increase in knowledge and information about college life, securing and managing related money and admission procedures. Since social support is so important to the development of resilience (Metzger, 2008), it may be viewed that the camp contributed to the potential resilience of these foster youth. The educational process was experiential, based on a college campus, and engaged youth fully in the curriculum. It involved peer support, role modeling, mentoring and active learning sessions led by faculty, and students who were often foster care alumni themselves. Leaders and speakers came from a range of disciplines, institutions and organizations. This approach and curriculum contributed to participants' perceptions of the camp as an experience that enhanced their life skills, self-concept, sense of empowerment and purpose.

5.2. An experiential learning model

Conrad and Hedin (1982) found that youth who participated in experiential programs had greater interest in and motivation for learning and also displayed behaviors known to mediate academic achievement, such as acting autonomously, developing mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers, boosts to self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. The curriculum developed for this summer camp experience was designed to be fun, interactive, product-oriented, and engaged participants in ways that helped make the content memorable. This purposeful design of camp sessions was validated by the camp participants who reported the most highly valued activities were those that resulted in a concrete product with practical application, such as a completed resume, having a first draft of a college admission essay completed during camp, having the experience of completing the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, and having access to a resource binder that listed scholarship information targeted to the population. Not only was the curriculum well received by the camp participants, but also perceptions of learning and knowledge gain were sustained over time.

5.3. Promoting resilience, engaging youth: Peer-based mentoring

Another strength of the camp was the inclusion of a positive, peer-based mentoring model. Peer-based mentoring is an evidence-based practice identified in the literature as a protective factor that helps vulnerable populations overcome risks. (Day, 2006; Garmezy, 1994). There were many positive role models supporting this program, ranging from program organizers to camp counselors, motivational speakers, social workers, community organizers, drivers, dorm staff, volunteers and more. The people with greatest impact, according to focus group discussions, were those who had been through the foster care system themselves—those with whom the young people could easily identify, trust and build positive relationships. The active leadership of the camp counselors in peer-based mentoring throughout the duration of the camp was viewed positively and appeared to add credibility and validity to the educational experiences that were offered during the course of the program.

5.4. Systemic approach

A camp like this can be a supportive step towards achieving higher educational goals and building the resilience of the individual young person. However, it may be only one of a range of other community and institutional options in a wider system of support that also meet a range of different individual needs in pursuit of similar personal goals. There is a great need to increase coordination between public and private child welfare agencies and colleges and universities to ensure a seamless transition from high school to college for foster youth (McNaught, 2009). This includes the collective development of experiential-based curriculum models and financial and other supports that target foster care youth to put them on a college trajectory path that leads to stable and meaningful employment.

This camp as an intervention that promotes resilience among some transitioning foster youth needs to be part of a wider package of supportive options from the community, schools and through college and into employment. As a concept, resilience, like social support, has been criticized for lack of consistency around constructs, measurement and definitions (Luthar, 2003), yet a multi-dimensional view of resilience as an ongoing dynamic process, rather than a one time quality or circumstance, means that interventions also need to address more than one level at a time. This pre-college program needs to be part of a larger, more comprehensive, coherent system that engages youth in both the community and school environments, and continues to offer support not only with college enrollment, but will also help to retain students throughout the pursuit of their post-secondary education goals. This program should be one of the many around the state and across the nation that young people may attend. Program alumni could become future camp counselors and mentors for the next generation of youth, as this service learning model has been recognized by MSU as an experience worthy of college credit and as another step toward future success in higher education for college going foster care alumni.

Integration of the summer camp experience as part of a broader system of community and college-based supports for college-going foster care alumni has been a positive development.

5.5. Future research

Research ideas for the future include building in a more long-term longitudinal dimension. For example, it would be valuable to track and interview camp participants and a matched sample over a longer period of time through high school graduation, college enrollment and retention throughout their post-secondary education experience as well as documentation of the range of supports accessed by students. From the perspectives of camp leadership, who are also foster care alumni, there could be an assessment of whether exposure to leadership opportunities like participation as a camp counselor or in other peer-mentoring projects could actually enhance college retention rates for college-enrolled foster care youth.

6. Conclusion

It has already been widely acknowledged that transitioning foster youth should be provided more support, yet despite legislative mandates (e.g. Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, Fostering Connections of Success Act of 2008), this need is still neglected by those with sufficient power and influence to make positive systemic change for young people aging out of the foster care system (Collins & Clay, 2009). Systemic potential for change needs to be grasped by policy makers, including legislators, child welfare administrators and higher education institutions. Young people in foster care deserve the same opportunities to achieve their education and employment goals

as their non-foster care peers. A range of supports in the community and colleges could support this. Foster care alumni as role models delivered the MSU camp as a successful intervention and linked youth with mentors and can provide a model for similar programs in all types of higher education institutions.

Changes in the U.S. economy have made the attainment of a higher education credential more important than ever to obtain self-sufficiency (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009). Even when resources are tight, support for transitioning foster youth in the pursuit of a higher education credential is a positive investment in the future workforce and savings against potentially poor outcomes.

Acknowledgments

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