

# The Relationship between State Supports and Post-Secondary Enrollment among Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: An Analysis of the National Youth in Transition Database

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The present study uses the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) to examine whether youth in foster care who live in states with tuition and fee waivers, scholarships, and/or collaborative support networks have higher levels of post-secondary

enrollment. Results reveal that tuition and fee waivers and collaboratives can increase post-secondary enrollment. However, states vary dramatically in the effectiveness of these initiatives, leading to only marginal improvements in higher education enrollment for youth formerly in foster care in the United States.

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Youth in foster care have college aspirations similar to youth who have not been in care (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). However, their ability to realize their higher education goals is considerably different: It is estimated that between 1% and 11% of foster care alumni complete a four-year degree compared to 24% of the general population (Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Overall, outcomes for youth formerly in foster care are troubling. As young adults, these youth exhibit relatively high rates of unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, and incarceration (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grugan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Park, Metraux, & Culhane, 2005; Reilly, 2003). Higher education provides an opportunity for youth formerly in foster care to secure a more productive path for themselves. Thus, it is important to develop programs and policies that will help youth formerly in foster care pursue and achieve their higher education goals.

Fortunately, this movement is underway. At the federal level, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program created the Education Training Voucher (ETV) program in 2002, which provides youth formerly in foster care up to \$5,000 in financial aid for college. In addition, many states have engaged in public and private efforts to support higher education for foster care alumni (FCA). Currently, 22 states offer tuition and fee waivers for FCA, and several other states offer competitive scholarships (Hernandez, Day, & Henson, 2017; Cohen, 2013). In addition, a number of states have developed collaborative organizations that aim to increase higher education among FCA. These initiatives are typically not financial in nature, but are designed to remove barriers to and increase supports for college enrollment and success (e.g., campus support programs).

While these statewide efforts are commendable and intuitively beneficial, there is no available research confirming the benefits, quantifying the level of impact, and/or identifying what remains to be done to place FCA on par with their peers. The present study uses the National Youth in Transition Database to explore these issues. Using panel data from youth aging out of foster care (2011–2015), we examine rates of

enrollment in higher education for youth formerly in foster care and how these rates vary depending on the level and type of state support offered.

## **Background and Literature Review**

Youth in foster care are less likely than non-foster youth to complete high school or earn a GED. Consequently, they exhibit lower rates of college attendance, as well (Wolanin, 2005). For the select group that pursues their goals of higher education, the chance of success is also low (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Courtney et al., 2001; Davis, 2006). Day and colleagues (2011) revealed that foster care alumni attending a four-year university were more likely to drop out than a comparison group of first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds who had not been in foster care. More specifically, Davis (2006) found a graduation rate of 26% for youth who identified as formerly in foster care (a ward of the court/orphan) relative to the national average for graduation rates of 56%.

The lower level of educational attainment is not surprising, as youth formerly in foster care experience a number of barriers to academic success. First, research suggests that they are less academically prepared than other students (Sheehy et al., 2001). Youth in foster care often move frequently due to changes in placements, which leads to a disruptive school experience (Trout et al., 2008). They exhibit higher rates of mental and behavioral health problems than other students, which can impact their achievement and perceptions of their abilities (Emerson, 2006; McMillan et al., 2003; Shin, 2006). When they and those around them see their potential as limited, they experience little encouragement and/or preparation for a college career (Merdinger et al., 2005). Students who have foster care experience are less likely to take college preparatory classes and report that they (and others) didn't see themselves as "college material" (Blome, 1997; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). Finally, youth formerly in foster care have extremely limited financial resources (Davis, 2006; Merdinger et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005).

Consequently, the high and growing cost of post-secondary education is often an insurmountable obstacle.

While most studies confirm low levels of post-secondary achievement, Watt, Norton, and Jones (2013) found that foster care alumni at a four-year university in Texas had graduation rates similar to the general student population. The sample size for FCA was very small, from a single university, and thus not generalizable. However, it raises the possibility that FCA can succeed if perhaps given the instrumental and social support they lack. This conclusion was drawn because at the time, Texas was one of only 15 states that provided a tuition and fee waiver to youth formerly in foster care, the university had a strong campus support program for FCA, and a statewide collaborative had emerged to encourage higher education among youth formerly in foster care (Education Reach for Texans). In addition, research on the Better Futures program reveals that interventions can improve higher education participation among youth in foster care who have mental health challenges (Greenen et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2015).

Currently, 22 states provide tuition and fee waivers for youth formerly in foster care. However, the stipulations attached to the waivers are complex and differ dramatically by state (Hernandez, Day, & Henson, 2017). States vary in terms of the age of eligibility, youth requirements, and applicable placement types (e.g. foster, adopted, and/or kinship care). And within the eligibility criteria, some states offer the waiver to all youth formerly in foster care (e.g., Texas), while other states restrict the number of waivers distributed (e.g., Alaska). In addition, while all states are required to distribute the federally mandated ETV funds, there is considerable variation in the average amount distributed per student (see Simmel, Shpiegel, & Murschid, 2013). Finally, a number of states offer scholarship programs for youth formerly in foster care. Most of these are competitive and thus aren't strategies designed to get youth formerly in foster care into college en masse. However, they are likely to have some benefit, either instrumental or aspirational.

In addition to direct financial support, a number of states have developed nonprofits, consortiums, or collaboratives to support higher

education for FCA. Casey Family Programs (2016) provides a guide to resources about and links to these efforts. These initiatives typically aim to organize and mobilize colleges/universities, child welfare workers, and advocates. Their size and intensity of effort vary widely. However, these initiatives typically include efforts to raise the expectations for college enrollment, remove barriers to entry, and provide support to youth who do enroll. Many of these initiatives bring colleges and universities together to facilitate the development of campus support programs for FCA. Research reveals campus support programs to be quite diverse. However, they typically include support services such as outreach to high school students in foster care, mentoring, career programs, and/or peer activities (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). While there is some descriptive data on campus support programs, we know very little about their effectiveness.

It is clear that higher education can benefit youth aging out of foster care and that there are numerous statewide efforts to promote this goal. While the potential benefits of these policies and programs seem apparent, it is important to ascertain the extent to which these initiatives have impacted outcomes. In order to explore these issues, we use the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) to examine whether youth in foster care residing in states with documented support programs and policies are more likely to enroll in college and if so, to what extent.

## **Study Methods and Procedures**

### ***Data and Sample***

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program provides states with support and requires that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) track services and outcomes in an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the additional support for youth formerly in foster care. This led to the development of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), which includes data on youth aging

out of foster care in all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. For the present study, we use the NTYD Outcomes file from 2015 (excluding Puerto Rico). We use the panel data, which provide information on a cohort of youth in foster care who were age 17 in 2011. These youth were surveyed in 2011; follow-up interviews were done at age 19, then again at age 21. The study examines several outcomes at the two follow-up periods, educational attainment, and school enrollment.

Data are collected by the states and provided to the Children's Bureau. For the baseline population, no sampling was permitted. The cohort is a self-selected, non-probability sample from the baseline population and thus may contain non-response bias. From this cohort, states were allowed to follow all youth in foster care in the initial cohort or pull a probability sample for follow-up surveys. States have discretion in how the survey is administered (e.g., in person, internet, phone). However, all surveys must be administered to the person directly (no one else can answer the questions for them). The overall response rate for the initial cohort survey is 54% (the cohort divided by the baseline population). Response rates varied considerably by state, from 16% for New York to 100% for Vermont. The final sample for the study includes all cases for which follow-up information on both educational attainment and school enrollment are available ( $n = 9,161$ ).

### *Measures*

State support is captured by several variables: tuition and fee waivers, competitive scholarships, and statewide support initiatives (referred to as "collaboratives"). These state support variables are measured as dummy variables. While not necessarily a state sponsored program, we also examined average ETV distributions by state (in dollars).

Several sources were used to create the measure of state tuition and fee waivers. Information was obtained from analyses provided by Cohen (2013) and Hernandez, Day, and Henson (2017). These sources were used to identify states with legislated tuition and fee waivers and

their specific criteria. The information provided by these sources was cross referenced with websites from individual states in order to validate the information and identify the timing of the legislation. From these sources, we created a dummy variable for whether a state had a legislated tuition and fee waiver for youth in foster care as of 2012 (since the first NYTD follow-up occurred in 2013). Using this definition, we identified 17 states as having a tuition and fee waiver as of 2012. These waivers do vary considerably with regard to the specific eligibility requirements, the application processes, and the implementation procedures. However, these states were deemed sufficiently similar in that they all potentially offer a sizable amount of funding to a broadly defined population of youth in foster care. Thus, it is reasonable to believe they could substantially increase the overall rate of enrollment. While these states had the potential to offer waivers to a large number of youth in foster care, Hernandez, Day, and Henson (2017) revealed dramatic differences in the number of waivers distributed per state. Hernandez and colleagues also revealed that data on waiver distribution by state often requires primary research (interviews with state representatives). And for several states, these data are not available at all. For these reasons we did not include a variable on waiver distribution. Further, our investigation focuses on whether a state has a legislated waiver. A process evaluation of waiver access and implementation is distinct from, and beyond the scope of, the present study.

Our second state support concept (labeled scholar) identifies states that have funds (publicly or privately funded) to assist youth in foster care with higher education. These may be in the form of a tuition waiver, grant, or scholarship, but it is awarded through a competitive process and thus benefits a small number of youth in foster care. We identified these states through a state-by-state web search. We also created a dummy variable to capture whether a state has a documented collaborative (2012 or earlier) which aims to increase post-secondary enrollment among former youth in foster care. The Casey Family Programs Resources Guide (2016) and associated state websites were used to identify states with a documented collaborative. We believe this

variable captures those states with very organized efforts, however, we acknowledge that some states may engage in similar efforts but because they are not sufficiently documented, may not be captured with this variable. Finally, we include state ETV funds distributed per youth in foster care (Simmel et al., 2013).

The NYTD survey does not ask youth formerly in foster care if they are enrolled in a college or university. Thus, higher education enrollment was deduced from two variables. Respondents were asked to provide their highest level of education completed and if they are currently enrolled in and attending school. Our measure of post-secondary enrollment captures youth formerly in foster care who report that they have completed either a high school degree or their GED and are currently enrolled in school, or those who report that they have achieved the following (vocational degree, associate's degree, and/or bachelor's degree). Youth who meet these criteria at age 19 and/or 21 (waves 2 and 3) are coded as 1, while those not meeting these criteria are coded as 0. With this dummy variable, we were unable to capture youth that enrolled in the period between waves but dropped out before completing their degree.

We also include a number of control variables. We measure the respondent's gender (self-identified as male or female) and their race/ethnicity (e.g. white, African American, Hispanic, and other). We also measure variables to account for differences in the state demographic profiles. We include the poverty rate and the rate of college enrollment for youth age 18–24 in each state for 2014.

## Results

Table 1 provides a description of the sample. These data reveal that 32.2% of respondents report enrollment in higher education. This estimate is consistent with other studies that find between 20 and 30% of youth formerly in foster care attend college (Reilly, 2003; Wolanin, 2005). As expected, this figure is below the average post-secondary enrollment rate for all youth age 18–24 reported for the states (42.5%).



**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (n = 9,161)**

Variable	N	%
<b>Individual</b>		
Higher Education		
Yes	2,951	32.2
No	6,210	67.8
Gender		
Male	4,411	48.1
Female	4,750	51.9
Race/Ethnicity		
White	4,085	44.6
African-American	2,810	30.7
Hispanic	1,503	16.4
Other	763	8.3
<b>State</b>		
Mean % in Poverty	9,161	15.4
Mean % College		
Enrollment (age 18–24)	9,161	42.5
Tuition Waiver	3,443	37.6
Scholarships	7,230	78.9
Collaboration	3,174	34.7
Mean ETV (dollars)	9,161	2,072

Approximately 37.6% of respondents reside in a state with a tuition and fee waiver and 34.7% reside in a state with a documented collaboration to promote post-secondary education among FCA. For additional detail, Table 2 provides a state by state comparison of higher education enrollment rates and the various types of supports available.

To examine the potential effect of state supports on higher education enrollment, we conducted logistic regression analyses (presented in Table 3).

Model 1 in Table 3 provides a logistic regression predicting higher education enrollment using the key state support measures. Model 2

**Table 2. State-Level Supports (available on or before 2012)**

State	Tuition Waiver	Scholarships	Collaboration	ETV Above Mean	% Higher Ed Enrollment
Alabama		X		X	27.5%
Alaska	X	X		X	21.3%
Arizona		X			46.2%
Arkansas		X			24.1%
California		X	X		44.8%
Colorado		X			16.1%
Connecticut	X				39.4%
Delaware		X			17.2%
DC					34.5%
Florida	X				40.6%
Georgia		X	X		23.5%
Hawaii		X			55.6%
Idaho					39.3%
Illinois		X			35.2%
Indiana		X		X	30.9%
Iowa		X			28.6%
Kansas	X	X			22.2%
Kentucky	X				28.2%
Louisiana					17.5%

Maine	X	X	X				33.3%
Maryland	X						36.9%
Massachusetts	X	X					33.0%
Michigan		X	X				30.0%
Minnesota	X						34.8%
Mississippi		X	X		X		29.2%
Missouri	X	X			X		29.8%
Montana					X		31.9%
Nebraska		X	X				21.7%
Nevada		X	X				42.3%
New Hampshire	X		X				16.7%
New Jersey	X	X	X		X		42.5%
New Mexico		X	X				14.7%
New York		X	X				34.8%
North Carolina	X		X	X			27.8%
North Dakota							20.6%
Ohio		X	X	X			22.3%
Oklahoma	X	X	X		X		37.6%
Oregon	X	X	X		X		44.3%
Pennsylvania		X	X				37.2%
Rhode Island		X	X				24.3%

(continued)

**Table 2. State-Level Supports (available on or before 2012) (Continued)**

State	Tuition Waiver	Scholarships	Collaboration	ETV Above Mean	% Higher Ed Enrollment
South Carolina		X			24.3%
South Dakota					10.2%
Tennessee		X			29.7%
Texas	X	X	X		26.8%
Utah		X			25.0%
Vermont		X			23.5%
Virginia		X	X		40.1%
Washington		X	X	X	23.1%
West Virginia	X			X	14.1%
Wisconsin		X			30.7%
Wyoming		X		X	28.0%

*Note: \*Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Virginia have grant programs that some have classified as tuition waivers.*

**Table 3. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Higher Education Enrollment: Odds Ratios and Standard Errors**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Individual</b>		
Female		1.630***
		(.046)
<b>Race/Ethnicity (White-ref)</b>		
African-American		1.406***
		(.054)
Hispanic		1.248***
		(.068)
Other		1.520***
		(.085)
<b>State</b>		
% Poverty		.998
		(.009)
% College Enrollment		1.038***
		(.006)
Tuition Waiver	.974	1.116 <sup>d</sup>
	(.053)	(.056)
Scholarships	.800***	.980
	(.064)	(.068)
Collaboration	1.325***	1.266***
	(.052)	(.057)
ETV above average	1.000*	1.000
	(.000)	(.000)
<i>N</i>	9,161	9,161
Pseudo <i>R</i> Square	0.007	0.040

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ,  $d < = .10$

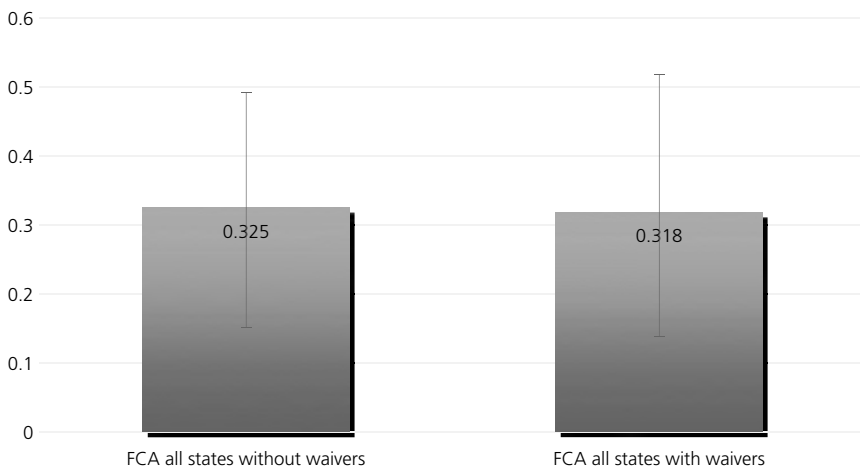
also includes individual and state control variables. Once demographic and economic controls are included, results reveal a directional effect for tuition waivers ( $p = .052$ ) and a statistically significant effect for collaboratives ( $p = .000$ ). Specifically, states with tuition and fee waivers

on average are associated with a 12% increase in the odds of higher education enrollment. States with collaboratives are associated with a 27% increase in the odds of enrollment. This analysis reveals no effect for scholarships and/or ETV distributions. While these findings are interesting, it is important to note that the model shows a poor fit (pseudo  $R^2 = .04$ ).

Because of the low level of explained variance in the logistic regression model, we conducted additional analyses to better understand the model limitations. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the predicted probabilities for higher education enrollment from the full regression models for youth residing in states without a tuition waiver and in states with a tuition waiver. It also provides the range (minimum and maximum) predicted enrollment rates for the states within each subgroup.

Figure 1 reveals that the predicted enrollment rate for FCA is approximately 32%, regardless of whether the youth resides in a state with or without a tuition and fee waiver. The ranges reveal the dramatic variation by state within the two subgroups. For example, the enrollment rate for states without tuition waivers ranges from 15% to

**Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities (and Ranges) for Higher Education Enrollment**



49% and for states with waivers, the rate ranges from 13% to 52%. In additional analyses of collaboratives (not shown), we also see substantial differences across states. States with collaboratives have enrollment rates ranging from 21% to 49% and states without collaboratives have rates that range from 13% to 52%. In short, our analyses reveal a small, weak relationship between tuition waivers and enrollment, a low level of explained variance for state support variables in general, and considerable heterogeneity in the effects of these policies by state.

## Discussion

In the present study, our goal was to determine if state support initiatives could improve post-secondary enrollment among youth formerly in foster care and if so, by how much. Our findings were complex. Our analysis revealed a small, directional relationship between state legislated tuition waivers and the odds of post-secondary enrollment. Youth in foster care who lived in states with a legislated waiver were 12% more likely to enroll in higher education than youth in states without waivers. Further, our results reveal considerable heterogeneity in the effect of these policies by state and a large amount of unexplained variance in our predictive models. While this weak relationship is discouraging, it is not surprising. Hernandez, Day, and Henson (2017) documented wide variation in the eligibility criteria and application process by state, leading to dramatic differences in waiver uptake. The authors conclude that waivers need to be broadly defined and easy to access in order to be utilized. Our findings are consistent with theirs. A tuition waiver, which provides youth formerly in foster care with financial support for college, is a theoretically informed and intuitively sound policy choice. However, our findings suggest that merely legislating a waiver for youth in foster care is not sufficient for ensuring that a large percentage of youth will be able to access the waiver and that they will enroll, and persist, in higher education.

Our study also revealed a positive effect of statewide collaboratives. Youth who reside in states with well-organized collaboratives aiming to

improve post-secondary education among youth formerly in foster care were 27% more likely to enroll in higher education than youth in states without these collaboratives. This is a larger association than that found for waivers. Perhaps this is because collaboratives, by definition, are inter-disciplinary and comprehensive. They represent what informed and influential agents can do when working together, and across systems, to improve outcomes for youth formerly in foster care. However, it is important to note that the relationship between collaboratives and enrollment also varied considerably from state to state and did not contribute substantively to the amount of explained variance in our model.

In general, our findings highlight the limitation of assuming that legislated waivers and collaboratives will invariably have substantial impact. In addition to the adoption of these strategies, equal attention must be paid to their design and implementation. And these initiatives cannot be isolated from the broader social context. For example, Texas has a tuition and fee waiver with broad coverage (since 1993) and yet its enrollment rate is below the national average (27%). Conversely, California does not have a tuition and fee waiver but has one of the highest enrollment rates (45%). While these outcomes challenge some of the model findings, they are understandable given a qualitative assessment of the state context. Texas has traditionally ranked low in state supports for children (e.g., social services, health care, and education) and child protection specifically (TLSG, 2011). While there is a Texas collaborative (Education Reach for Texans), this initiative is in its infancy and operates with little financial support. Conversely, California has a relatively comprehensive state support system for children, is a leader in extended support for youth in foster care, and hosts a collaborative network, in place for over a decade and supported by large philanthropic contributions (Courtney et al., 2015). Both states are engaging in commendable efforts to improve higher education outcomes for FCA. However, the broader state context may impact the efficacy of these initiatives.

It is important to note that our study has significant methodological limitations. The National Youth in Transition Database attempts to



track youth aging out of the foster care system through survey research. Youth aging out of care have disproportionately high rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and incarceration (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006) and these youth are unlikely to be adequately represented in the NYTD sample. Another limitation is that we conceptualize and operationalize state variables as dichotomies. Thus, we are only able to measure concepts such as legislated tuition and fee waivers or state-wide collaboratives in terms of their presence or absence, not in terms of their content or quality. Also, the reliability and validity of our higher education enrollment measure may be compromised by biases in self-report or delayed and intermittent enrollment patterns of FCA. Finally, our pre-experimental design can only examine outcomes after state initiatives were enacted rather than examining the changes that occur in each state over time. Despite these methodological concerns, the present study is the first investigation to quantitatively explore the potential impact of legislated tuition waivers and collaborative networks on post-secondary enrollment. Unfortunately, our analysis of national survey data did not produce any clear conclusions about the benefits of state supports. However, we believe our study draws attention to the limitations of a national analysis and the need for additional state sponsored research. All states need to gather longitudinal administrative data to better understand higher education outcomes of youth in foster care. And for states with waivers, process evaluations are needed to see if the waivers are being accessed and outcome evaluations are needed to see if waiver use translates into post-secondary achievement. Collectively, this information will allow us to identify best practices for waiver design, implementation, and post-secondary success.

When children are removed from their families of origin and placed into foster care, the state assumes responsibility for them. Just as families are, the state is morally obligated to raise these children and launch them into adulthood. High rates of homelessness, addiction, unemployment, and incarceration suggest that states often don't fulfill their obligations. Part of the reason for this is that the state model of care has historically ended abruptly at age 18, leaving a youth alone and

unprepared for adult life. More recently, several states have extended support past age 18 and promoted post-secondary education through various policies and programs. While it is logical to argue that these initiatives probably increase higher education enrollment, we must also acknowledge that they do not guarantee meaningful change. To this end, we observed that state supports sometimes do have the desired effect. However, in other instances they fall short in terms of substantially raising enrollment rates. First, states will need to construct waiver legislation with broad eligibility. In addition, states must devote attention, not only to establishing these supports, but also to their implementation. If youth in foster care find the waiver application process complex and intimidating, if they are not emotionally or educationally prepared for college life when they age out, and if they have limited encouragement to pursue their academic goals, then the waiver may not be enough to propel them into higher education. And if they do enroll, but college campuses do not provide the additional support needed, their post-secondary experience may be short lived. However, if a holistic system of financial, instrumental, and social support is provided, then substantial increases in enrollment (and graduation) rates may follow. Tuition and fee waivers and collaboratives are not a prescription for success, but rather a set of opportunities for improving post-secondary enrollment of youth formerly in foster care. States must initiate these strategies and also demonstrate commitment to their execution and evaluation in order to achieve the desired impact.

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