

**Foster Youth and the UC: A Qualitative and Quantitative Ethnographic Account of  
Educational Outcomes for Former Foster Youth at the University of California**

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## **I. Introduction**

According to Promises2Kids, a nonprofit organization formally known as the Child Abuse Prevention Foundation of San Diego County, “On any given day, there are 3,000 foster children in San Diego County. Each year, approximately 200 foster children reach age 18 expected to transition to adulthood but lack the skills and resources to support this transition.” Foster youth are heavily impacted by factors outside of their control that inhibit their achievement for academic, career, and personal pursuits. Current statistics on the outcomes of foster youth show that most foster children do not achieve a higher education. In the United States, of the 55% of foster youth that do pursue higher education, only 8% graduate or obtain a Bachelor’s or equivalent degree (Promises2Kids). This social disparity requires an intervention. There is a wide gap between the educational success of foster youth and non-foster youth, one that creates a wider class divide and reinforces a lack of social mobility for children of working-class and impoverished backgrounds. It is important in a free society for children of any background to have access to educational and career success no matter their socioeconomic background or familial circumstance. If a student of any background has the capacity for greatness, it is unjust to let that possibility get squandered by the systems they live under. To intervene, we must create a dialectic that questions what resources former foster youth need to complete a higher education. Discovering where foster youth need support will be a step towards finding proper solutions and resources in order to support the academic endeavors of foster youth and minimize the educational disparity they face. This research in no way seeks to prove any connections as causative factors to academic success. I merely seek to identify if there is a correlation with the statistical factors in order to further our understanding of access to resources within academia for impacted students.

## **II. Objective**

The objective of this qualitative research is to collect data from a sample group of former-foster youth who've attended the University of California (UC) institutions and either graduated and obtained a Bachelor's or higher degree or didn't complete their undergraduate education at their respective UC institution. By analyzing this data, inferences can be made about the outcomes of former-foster youth in the pursuit of higher education. Analytics may also show where the educational disparities between foster youth and non-foster youth are rooted outside of assumed naturalistic factors.

### III. Literature Review

Research shows that foster youth have higher rates of special education eligibility (37.5% compared to the 13.8% nationally for non-foster youth) as well as higher rates of suspension, which have proven to have adverse effects on academic achievement and graduation from high school, 31% to 47% compared to the national 12% (Weinberg et. al. 50). On average, foster youth who received special education and foster youth that didn't both perform lower on standardized tests than non-foster youth special education students and non-foster youth general education students respectively. It is important to highlight that because the number of foster youth who have disabilities is a substantial population there must be a gap in the statistics we currently have for their higher education outcomes (Geenen). The statistics provided are generalized for all foster youth (regardless of other variable factors), so the numbers are likely depicting an inaccurate representation of the amount of foster children that attempt a higher education, necessitating specifications in research methods. There are a few case studies on the academic outcomes for foster youth, though most of these studies don't cover higher education for foster youth. One study—“*A descriptive analysis of programs serving foster care alumni in higher education: Challenges and opportunities*” by Jennifer M. Geigera, Megan Hayes Pielb, Angelique Dayc, and Lisa Schelbed—comes close to determining where foster care alumni (former foster-youth) who pursue higher education are lacking in resources. Their results indicated “several challenges related to financial

support, student engagement, student housing, and helping students manage family and personal issues,” when it came to the perceptions of challenges related to providing support to foster care alumni in higher education. While their research was able to discover how the program directors, staff, and researchers from support programs perceived where foster care alumni lacked support, their research lacks qualitative data from the foster care alumni themselves. Therefore, only serving as statistical research and not an anthropological account where interviews could strengthen the understanding of roadblocks for former foster youth. Progress in this research could also be achieved by looking into the intersection of foster care alumni and foster youth with disabilities and where there are disparities with accommodations and academic support, thus there is a necessity for new data collection and analyses.

#### **IV. Research Design and Methods**

Based on current statistical data, research points to financial need as a primary factor hindering foster care alumni from achieving a higher education. I hypothesize that, in tandem with financial hardship, access to adequate mental health care and academic/learning accommodations is not only overlooked but is a root issue for the achievement of foster care alumni. This means that there should be a relationship between academic success and access to support programs and adequate healthcare. This study will use a single case study research design as well as ethnographic interviews, employing quantitative and qualitative data with an anthropological account of students at UC institutions to create a collection of inferential data applicable for the hypothesis above. This case study timeline is undetermined depending on the amount of time it will take to get an adequate amount of responses for the data collection. Records will need to be collected from UC institutions on the cases of students who attempted to achieve a higher education whether or not they have graduated. In order to do this, surveys can be sent from the UC institutions that are applicable. There are programs that cater to former foster youth at every UC school, whether that’s Renaissance Scholars and Smith Society at UCSC, Office of

Foster Youth Support Services, or Guardian Scholars which is hosted by several of the other UCs (Regents). It would be beneficial to have these resource programs as informants to data collection and representation of the data and interviews collected as to protect students' anonymity and to protect the current services and resources provided via the various programs. It could be posited that conducting this research could potentially be of benefit to said programs by using data to garner support from donors and obtain grant funding federally. The recommended method of data collection could be an online survey with proper security protections.

**Survey Questions:**

What university, college, or higher education institution did you attend? Are you a transfer student, if so what was your previous college? Did you graduate/obtain an Associate's or Bachelor's degree?

What was your college GPA?

Were you a first generation college student?

What is your ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) score?

Were you eligible for special education for any time in your schooling?

Did you receive special education or related services for any time in your schooling?

Were you financially independent (no one claimed you on their taxes) for your undergrad?

Did you have to work part or full time during your undergrad (including work study)?

Did you struggle financially, whether to pay for school or basic necessities?

Did you experience food and/or housing insecurity during undergrad?

Did your college provide programs like EOP or foster-youth specific resource/support programs and/or Did you receive support from your high school from a college-support program?

Did you have access to adequate healthcare (physical and psychological care) when necessary?

(If applicable) Did you receive adequate educational accommodations for learning or other disabilities?

With these questions, analytics can be done on the responses to determine if there is a strong correlation between access to academic resources/support programs and academic achievement for former foster youth in higher education. The variables we will be looking at include whether or not a degree was obtained as well as college GPA and access to adequate healthcare and access to support programs/resources. Another important variable would be to look at the labor expended by foster youth out of financial necessity which could interfere with academic capability. Other variables include ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) score which could correlate with the necessity of healthcare and support programs due to the research that ACEs directly correlated with an individual's stress response system (Burke 2014). By connecting ACEs scores with the access to resources the students had during their undergraduate studies, we may be able to find a correlation with academic success and the former. We can also see if there is a connection with academic success and access to special education or related services. Another important component would be surveying a control group of traditional students; students from nuclear family dynamics, 3rd-generation or longer access to higher education within the

student's family, and students of the middle to upper class (students that are financially dependent upon their parents).

### **Conclusions**

With this data collection and analysis, I hope to be able to draw a connection between access to academic resources and academic achievement for former foster care youth in higher education. The importance of this data lies in the fact that we can close the class and education gap between foster youth and non foster youth by providing adequate resources and support to impacted students, which all foster youth would identify as. Access to an equitable education affects everyone and providing a more level playing field for youth no matter their background and situation in life has the possibility of enacting great change.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

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Weinberg, Lois & Zetlin, Andrea & Shea, Nancy. (2021). Improving Educational Prospects for Foster Youth, *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 2006.

[ANNOTATION]

### **QUESTIONS TO CONDUCT FURTHER RESEARCH**

1. **Grade Point Average Disparity:** What is the mean GPA for former foster youth students at a UC institution compared to the general student population?
2. **Satisfactory Academic Progress:** How do the policies and standards surrounding Satisfactory Academic Progress impede disadvantaged students?
  - a. There are significant statistics pointing to a need for policy reform.
3. **Healthcare/Ongoing Health Conditions:** Former foster youth are at greater risk for ongoing health conditions, mental illness, trauma-induced disorders, special needs disabilities, etc. How does the treatment or lack thereof for these conditions affect a foster care alumni student's academic ability and success?
  - a. **Personal Anecdote:** For instance, the difference in my transcript between Fall quarter of 2021 and Winter quarter of 2022 is myself finally being medicated for a diagnosis of depression and my grades went from withdrawals and an incomplete to all As and one B.



### **MORE REFERENCES TO FURTHER RESEARCH**

1. *“Is a Foster Child’s GPA Impacted When They Change Homes?”*  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SL25AA32xogRIonbx8\\_GgNku\\_-wtfmKt/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SL25AA32xogRIonbx8_GgNku_-wtfmKt/view?usp=sharing)  
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2. *“Helping Former Foster Youth Graduate From College: Campus Support Programs in California and Washington State”*  
<https://www.cacollegepathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Helping-Former-Foster-Colleges-in-CA-and-WA.pdf>  
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3. *“Higher Education for Foster Youth”* <https://nfyi.org/issues/higher-education/>  
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4. *“As More Schools Aid Foster Students, Data on Results Needed, Researchers Say”*  
<https://youthtoday.org/2019/03/as-more-colleges-states-aid-youth-in-foster-care-data-on-results-is-needed-researchers-say/>  
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5. *“Pipeline to Success: Supporting California Foster Youth from High School to Community College”* <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Pipeline-to-Success-report-web.pdf>  
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7. *“Financial Aid Strings are a One-Way Ticket Out of College for Foster Youth”*  
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8. *“How Satisfactory Academic Progress Policies Impede Student Success and Equity”*  
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9. *“How America Pays For College”*  
<https://www.salliemae.com/content/dam/slm/legacy/assets/research/hap/HowAmericaPaysforCollege2018.pdf>  
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10. *“Building Bridges: How State Policies Can Support Postsecondary Education Success for Students with Experience in Foster Care”* <https://jbay.org/resources/building-bridges-webinar/>  
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11. [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EhQ7Ag1y6htHTgpA8JfD4fUyVYh6tuwozEVhK\\_XEjN8/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EhQ7Ag1y6htHTgpA8JfD4fUyVYh6tuwozEVhK_XEjN8/edit)
12. [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fIT7MihXLZ6RyTq1VSDSUJWpAcRHTB-pe\\_3yYyJ998I/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fIT7MihXLZ6RyTq1VSDSUJWpAcRHTB-pe_3yYyJ998I/edit)

**NOTES ON REFERENCES:**

John Burton Advocates for Youth: JBAY is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded by retired State Senator John Burton. JBAY works throughout California and is headquartered in San Francisco, with an office in Los Angeles and staff in San Diego.