

1-page summary: Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories

Article Title Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 23(1), 28-54.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118791776>

Research Question

What pre-college enrollment factors, post-enrollment factors, and college characteristics affect the likelihood that students with foster care histories earn a college degree?

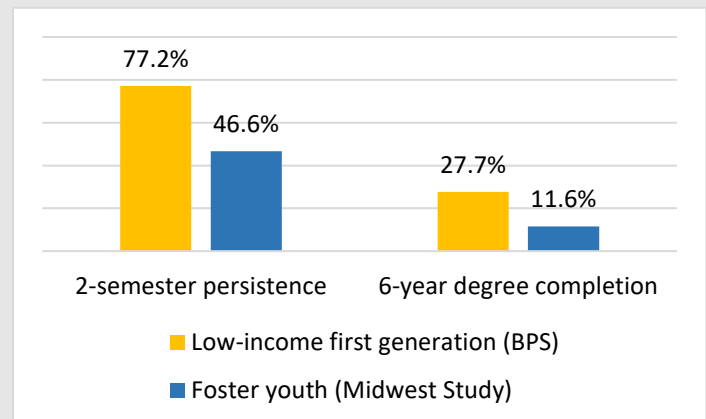
Data & Methods

Sample: 329 Midwest Study participants who had enrolled in college at least six years before we obtained their college records (i.e., first enrolled in college before age 23/24). The Midwest Study is a longitudinal study of young people who were in foster care in three Midwestern states, and who were surveyed five times between the ages of 17 and 25/26. We obtained National Student Clearinghouse records in 2015, when participants were 29/30 years old. We also compared 2-semester persistence rates and 6-year graduation grades of Midwest Study college students to those of a nationally representative sample of low-income first-generation students from the Beginning Postsecondary Education study.

Analytic methods: The main outcome is 2-year or 4-year college degree (yes/no). We investigated four groups of factors: (1) background characteristics measured at age 17/18 (e.g., demographic characteristics, school history and academics, foster care history), (2) preentry factors, which are measured before youth enrolled in college (e.g., parental status, mental health, alcohol/substance use, economic hardships, full-time employment, educational aspirations, social support, marital status), (3) postentry factors, which are measured after youth enrolled in college (same as preentry factors), and (4) characteristics of the college students attended (e.g., type and selectivity, cost of tuition, characteristics of the student body, per-student expenditures on instruction and student support). We used logistic regression to examine these predictors of degree completion, and as a robustness check ran a two-stage probit model to account for possible selection bias.

Main Findings

- Midwest Study students attended similar types of colleges as low-income first-generation students but had lower persistence and degree completion rates
- In regression analyses, females were more likely than males to complete a degree, as were students who first enrolled before age 19 (vs. students who enrolled later).
- Three postentry factors that decreased the odds of degree completion: being a parent, having to work full-time, and experiencing a greater number of economic hardships.
- Enrolling in a 4-year college (especially a selective or highly selective 4-year college) increased the odds of degree completion.



Implications

- Although low-income first-generation students and foster students face some of the same obstacles to completing a degree, foster students had much lower persistence and degree completion rates. This finding, coupled with what we know about barriers unique to foster students, make the case that foster students would benefit from customized, robust supports to help them finish college.
- Three major areas involve supporting students who are parents (e.g., subsidizing childcare), students who are struggling economically (e.g., tuition waivers, increasing the ETV amount, Extended Foster Care), and ensuring work doesn't stymie degree completion (e.g., offering priority on-campus work for foster students)
- When feasible and fitting, encouraging youth to enroll early and enroll in 4-year rather than 2-year colleges may increase their odds of completing a degree. 4-year schools have higher retention rates and spend more on resources to support students. Other studies find that some students with foster care histories undermatch (attend a 2-year school when they could have been admitted to a 4-year school).