

1-page summary: Ties that bond and bridge for college students with foster care backgrounds

Article Title Okpych, N. J. & Gray, Lori. (2021). Ties that bond and bridge: Exploring social capital among college students with foster care histories using a novel social network instrument (FC-Connects). *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(6), 683-705. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09553-x>

Purpose

1. To pilot a new social network instrument designed specifically for college students with foster care backgrounds the FC-Connects
2. To examine the social support and social networks of a cohort of first-year college students enrolled in a campus-based support program, and differences by students' level of avoidant attachment

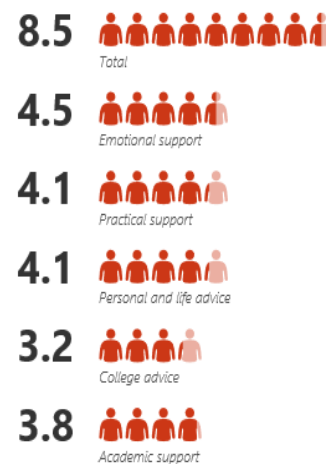
Data & Methods

Sample: 26 students (response rate = 93%) of first-year college students participating in a campus-based support program (CSP) for students with foster care histories at a Midwestern university.

Analytic methods: Students completed an online survey that collected information about their demographics, education and foster care histories, and other characteristics (e.g., avoidant attachment). Information about students' social networks were gathered from the Foster Care Connections in College (FC-Connects), an instrument designed specifically for college students in foster care. The instrument asked youth to name people they turn to for bonding capital (*emotional support, tangible support, and personal advice*) and bridging capital (*college advice and academic support*). This study reports characteristics of students, their social networks, and their nominees; tests for differences in social support by students' level of avoidant attachment (AA); and examines the social network of the first-year CSP cohort (i.e., a "whole network" analysis).

Main Findings

- Students named an average of 8.5 people as supports. Emotional support was the most prevalent type of support, and help with academics (e.g., studying, writing a paper) was the least prevalent. Most nominees (62%) provided two or more types of support.
- About two-fifths of nominees were family, foster parents, or friends (41%), but nearly a third (32%) were people who were part of the CSP, especially youths' coaches. CSP staff were key sources of college advice and academic support.
- For the most part, students with different levels of AA did not significantly differ in their social support, except that students high in AA were less likely than students lower in AA to say that they "enough" emotional support. Youth who were higher in AA were more likely to rate their nominee as being less dependable.
- The whole network analysis showed that 1/3 of students did not name any of their cohort peers as people they would turn to for support, while a few handful of students were very connected and were critical in bridging different students together.



Implications

- Students had less bridging social capital (i.e., connections to people who help them to "get ahead") than bonding capital (i.e., connections to people who help them "get by"). Given how important bridging capital is to college success, it is important to ensure students are connected to individuals who can provide college guidance and academic support, and to foster these relationships throughout the year.
- If the program coaches, staff, and mentors were subtracted out, the number of people students could turn to for college advice and academic support would be cut in half.
- It is noteworthy how CSP staff became prime sources of bridging and bonding capital in a relatively short time span, early in students' college careers. It is important for CSPs to be staffed by professionals who are proactive and persistent with connecting to students and who share characteristics or have specialized knowledge of the unique needs of students with care backgrounds.
- Several students were highly connected to others in their cohort. If CSP staff can identify these students early on, they could be engaged as leaders to shape cohort culture and help bring in students who are less connected.