Researcher seeks to increase college enrollment, success among foster youth

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Large percentages of foster youth have college aspirations, but estimates from research suggest that no more than 20 percent of that population are known to enroll and fewer than half of them actually graduate.

Royel Johnson, assistant professor of education (higher education) and research associate in the College of Education's Center for the Study of

Higher Education, is hopeful that cross-sector collaboration among higher education institutions, child and family service agencies, and other community stakeholders can enhance those numbers.

Johnson, in his second year at Penn State, was a part of research team at Ohio State examining the educational experiences of emancipating [foster youth](#).

"In Ohio there are about 13,000 youth in the foster care system who have experienced some form of abuse or neglect. And each year more 1,200 emancipate or 'age-out' from the system with few, if any, resources to successfully transition to adulthood," Johnson said.

Youth who emancipate from the foster care system often do not have access to support and resources from family and friends, something other students often benefit from. As a result, they experience difficulties meeting their basic needs, such as food, shelter and money, according to Johnson.

"Our research focused on identifying those factors that place foster youth at risk but also protective factors that help facilitate their success," Johnson said.

He said students in the Ohio foster care system shared stories about how being in the system impacted the availability of resources and educational preparation. These challenges ranged from frequent and abrupt changes in school placements as a result of being moved from home to home; low educational expectations; and lack of exposure to high-quality teachers and curriculum, according to Johnson.

"These challenges, among many others, create sizable opportunity gaps that significantly reduce the likelihood that foster youth can prepare for [college](#)," Johnson said.

"I was really fortunate to be a part of a team committed to engaging in translational research ... applying what we learn through our work to policy and practice, especially within our local context," he said. "This led us to collaborate with various stakeholders at Ohio State and across the city of Columbus.

"Complex problems defy singular approaches. The same is true with broadening college access for foster youth. Their educational challenges are so intricate … and interconnected to other systems and policies [so] that no single institution, sector or field of study alone can successfully respond to all of their needs. It requires all of us working together toward a common goal," he said.

Recognizing the importance of collaboration, Johnson said his research team convened a working group consisting of emancipated foster youth; university faculty, including representatives from the Colleges of Education, Social Work and Public Affairs; community leaders; and representatives of city agencies such as child and family services, among others.

One outcome of this group was the development of a pre-college access program to provide foster youth with an opportunity to experience college for a day, while exposing them to information and resources critical for navigating college-going decisions.

"Drawing on insights from our research, we designed a day-long program that we hosted twice a year for three years. The program consisted of presentations from university representatives, including those who work in academic admissions and [financial aid](link) and offered tailored information about preparing college applications and applying for financial aid," Johnson said.

"What we learned in our work is that some foster youth experience

stigma and as a result don't disclose that identity in the college admissions process, thus not benefiting from programs and resources designed for them … so we wanted to demystify that process."

Students also met with counseling support services, representatives from child and family services who discussed transitional programs and resources they qualified for, and also heard from other community groups who offered local services, according to Johnson.

"Many of the offices and representatives within the program typically operate in isolation, with little knowledge of what others are doing," he said. "This program provided us an opportunity to work together, taking stock of all our resources and integrating them in a digestible way for participants."

To assess and measure program outcomes, surveys were administered at the start and conclusion of the day, and students also participated in focus groups, Johnson said.

"We wanted to see if we could detect any changes in students' knowledge of resources, interest in higher education and confidence in applying the information they learned through the program," he explained.

On average, about 40 foster youth who were juniors or seniors in high school participated in the program each semester. They explicitly focused on youth expected to age out of the foster care system, as they are the most at risk.

"These are youth whom the agency was never able to identify permanent home placements for through adoption. Many have been shuffled around through various group homes and have stayed with various relatives or friends. They lack stable adult support that's necessary for college preparation," he said.

While the program was designed to promote access to higher education "as a valuable pathway for achieving their goals and dreams," Johnson said the committee also recognized that not everyone will go to college.

"Their lack of interest or pursuit of higher education should not be for lack of information, resources and support," he said. "And far too often that is the case for foster youth. Even if the students who decided by the end of the day that college is really not for me, that's OK, but it shouldn't be for lack of exposure or resources. All students should have the opportunity to pursue higher education."

Johnson said his team concluded its research knowing that the students walked away from the program feeling more prepared, having an awareness of the financial aid and college admissions process and being more knowledgeable about local and federal resources and supports available to them. Having an interdisciplinary cross-sector team not only helped reveal some of the challenges foster youth who are aging out continue to experience, but allowed them to work collaboratively, tailoring and integrating their efforts, Johnson added.

He stressed the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the kind of work where groups such as foster care cut across so many different areas. To that end, Johnson has received a Research Initiation Grant from Penn State's College of Education for a case study of statewide initiatives across the country to learn the ways in which states are collaborating and working cross-sectors to deal with the challenge of how to increase access for foster youth.

"Cross-sector collaboration has become an increasingly common approach among education leaders to addressing the postsecondary education challenges facing foster youth," Johnson said. "This study will deepen our understanding of these initiatives while identifying factors that contribute to their viability.

"There is a science to collaboration, especially across sectors. If these initiatives aren't working together in efficient and sustainable ways, their impact will be marginal, at best," he added. "Through this study, I'm hoping to help inform future state efforts."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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