TRELLIS
FOUNDATION

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:

A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting
Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

in twitter | **Connect with Trellis Foundation**

Sarah was not a typical college student. Having aged out of foster care, she had enrolled in college with a sense of relief at having made it this far, but she also knew it wasn't going to be easy. She expected financial and academic struggles, but there was another worry as well. Given how different her experiences had been, would she be able to fit in, to relate to her peers?

An in-class exercise brought this worry to a head.

"We were talking about budgets and priorities, and the example was to imagine you are a single mother with three kids, and here's the amount you make, and here's what rent costs, and here's what groceries cost, and here's what transportation costs, and so what will you do?" Sarah explained.

The in-class exercise was designed to provoke thought, to get students to consider multiple perspectives, to see things in a new way. In other words, it was exactly the kind of thing a typical college student might expect to encounter in a freshman social science class.

For Sarah, the exercise had personal implications not shared or understood by her classmates.

"For me, it was triggering, because this class exercise was more or less the story of how my mother came to give us up," Sarah described.

"Nobody in that classroom was going to relate to my experience. I was holding back tears when I left class that day."

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

1

Background: Challenges and Resilience

Each year about 1,500 youth age out of Texas foster care. The disruption and trauma many of them have experienced leave lasting effects, which may include academic struggles (from switching schools frequently), mental health struggles (for example, anxiety or depression), and not-so-smooth communication and social skills (from not having seen effective behaviors modeled).

Across many areas, the lack of stability and trusted adult guidance can create a nagging feeling of uncertainty. It's not hard to see how these difficulties can be mutually reinforcing: academic struggles generate unmanageable anxiety, even as the increased anxiety may lead students to act out, shut down, or interact awkwardly.

For a small percentage though, the next stretch of road, while not without difficulty, looks more promising because they are pursuing higher education, seeking a life-changing degree. By enrolling in college, they have already shown that they have the ability, determination, and resilience to improve their prospects.

Dr. Christine Norton on the Texas State Univeristy campus.

2

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

These young Texans have an opportunity to move on from a difficult start in life and begin a more optimistic chapter. The State of Texas offers a tuition waiver for this population that provides crucial support at a high-impact transitional point in life, but these students need even more intensive support.

This case study seeks to tell these students' stories in terms that are true to their experiences. It talks about the multifaceted and overlapping hardships and obstacles they face, as well as their feelings of pride and their optimism about what they can continue to achieve. The students' own voices capture the human reality behind the numbers, the experience of being in their situation. This case study also relates how two student programs that received assistance from Trellis are making a positive difference by providing a range of much-needed resources, as well as a sense of belonging and community.

A supportive community created to provide resources and to encourage achievement gives these students a better chance to move beyond the negative dynamics that have characterized their childhood experiences.

Both aspects—the resources and the community—are crucial to the students.

The Programs

At Texas State University (TSU) and Texas Woman's University (TWU), Trellis funding helped finance two initiatives aimed at supporting foster care alumni in higher education. These programs help give struggling students a better chance to transcend their circumstances and break the negative cycles that have worked against them.

In addition, the programs are discovering best practices in successful interventions, which may help inform programs at other schools across the nation. While both programs provide similar supports, each has tailored its services to the needs of its specific students and campus culture.

FACES

At Texas State, Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success (FACES) is a campus wide initiative leveraging partnerships with the Central Texas Foster Care Network, the School of Social Work, and other university departments and community groups to expand services to foster care alumni.

The initiative began as a mentoring program housed in the Division of Student Affairs. When Texas Sate staff realized that more than 120 incoming students in 2011 identified as students formerly in the foster care system, they sought to offer holistic evidence-based support services.

In their words:

"The students want and deserve agency and their own voice in developing the program. The saying is "Nothing about us, without us,' and that concept matters."

— Dr. Christine Norton, Faculty Advisor for Texas State University's FACES program

Through Trellis grant funds from 2011 to 2013, Texas State was able to increase intentional recruiting of students aging out of the foster care system by partnering with regional organizations committed to serving young people. Students were offered campus visits to Texas State and assistance with their college and FAFSA applications, and were connected to the university's summer bridge program.

Once students enroll at Texas State, they can join the FACES student organization. They are paired with a mentor and receive support from graduate student FACES advocates, who help lead the student organization and liaise with campus staff to meet specific needs as they arise.

A campus wide Foster Care Advisory Council allows the advocates and staff to identify policy and practice barriers and work to make changes.

For example, when Dr. Christine Norton, faculty advisor for the FACES program, became aware of the need for housing during the breaks, she was able to collaborate quickly with colleagues.

As a result of the entire school's buy-in, both housing and food services were arranged for these students during times when the campus had traditionally been closed. As problems arise, this awareness and attentiveness allows the university community to address and resolve challenges.

As a result, recruitment of first-time freshman into the FACES program rose in a year in which overall university enrollment did not. In addition, during the 2012-2013 school year, the freshman retention rate of foster care alumni rose from 67 to 84 percent, which was higher than the retention rate of the general student body.

4

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

FRONTIERS

Similarly, Texas Woman's University created a pilot program called Frontiers that is designed to increase comprehensive direct retention services for former foster youth who attend the university.

TWU sought to target services to the 15 to 20 students entering the university each year who aged out of the foster care system. The pilot program grant from 2012-16 provided funds for two graduate assistants housed in the Office of Student Life.

TWU partnered with CitySquare's Transition Resource Action Center (TRAC) to identify potential students to recruit to the program. The center serves as a resource for students throughout North Texas who are aging out of foster care, connecting them to resources and case management services as they transition to adulthood. TWU staff provides these students

with campus visits and assistance with their college and financial aid applications.

Once they enrolled at TWU, program participants received a specialized orientation, laptops, book stipends, break housing, mentors, dorm supplies, and specialized programming, which included workshops on career development, leadership training, and financial literacy.

As the project progressed, program leaders incorporated one-on-one coaching models, based on best practices in the field (see the section on Resources for Campuses at the end of this publication).

The program has been a success. Eighty percent of the Frontiers students have been retained at TWU or graduated. As a result of the successful grant pilot, TWU was able to incorporate the program into its campus resources by housing it in the Campus Alliance for Resource Education (CARE) office.

In their words:

"These students already have beaten the odds by applying and meeting the criteria to be accepted; however, even greater obstacles remain. The Frontiers Program will provide support and strategies to help them succeed as they transition into adulthood."

— Dr. Monica Mendez-Grant (pictured on the left), Vice President for Student Life at Texas Woman's University

Also pictured (on the right): Robin Head, Interim Director, Office of University Advancement, Texas Woman's University

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

5

Program Design: Key Principles

With both programs, participants, graduate assistants, and faculty advisors learned that programmatic elements such as tutoring, mentoring, and financial help are necessary, but not sufficient, to help these students succeed. Rather, a big part of the programs' impact comes from incorporating three key principles into their work:

1. Students have **their own voice** and know they are heard.

2. Obstacles are removed by creating **cross-campus collaboration**.

3. Students have a trusted **point of contact** to turn to as difficulties arise.

THEIR OWN VOICE

Importantly, these programs aren't just offered to the students, they are largely guided by the students, with input from faculty advisors and program staff. This leverages the students' personal experiences in ways that benefit the programs, and also creates a sense of investment on the part of the students. It's not a top-down, faceless, administrative entity; it's a human connection. It's something they're helping to build. It's a community. It's their program.

"The students want and deserve agency and their own voice in developing the program," explains Dr. Christine Norton, faculty advisor for Texas State University's FACES program. "The

In their words:

"I felt like our very first meeting was so helpful. I wasn't just listening, being told what to do. I could speak and be heard, and that meant so much. This program isn't happening around me while I'm being passive. No, I'm participating in this program. We're there for each other, and it's wonderful."

"I came into my first-semester math class and I was academically unprepared. And we've got study sessions, with snacks and tutoring, and this difficult challenge became doable."

— Kassandra, Texas Woman's University

6

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

saying is 'Nothing about us, without us,' and that concept matters. We need to approach this with cultural humility. These young adults have spent so much time being medicated, pathologized, and treated like they're a problem to be solved. The truth is that in terms of their experience, they know what it's been, and we don't. We favor a strengths perspective that says 'Let's build on what's right.' An approach that says 'We're here to fix you' isn't going to succeed. Listening is so important. One of the things I've appreciated about the Trellis grant is that it gave us space to make this effort collaborative with the students."

Similarly, Sheila Bustillos, graduate coordinator of Frontiers at Texas Woman's University, says, "If you haven't had good modeling there's so much you don't know, but if you're talked down to, you'll resist learning it. That approach just alienates people."

This sense of being heard and valued also manifests in the ways that the students support and mentor each other. TSU student Casey, who provides peer counseling through FACES,

says, "My own experience is what gives me the insight to help other students. The whole support network within the college, it's really strong. I want to spread the word about that availability."

CROSS-CAMPUS COLLABORATION

Many of the problems the FACES and Frontiers students experience are best addressed by help from multiple departmental offices. To help these students achieve at their optimum levels, a no-silos approach works best, with intersecting participation from Financial Aid, Career Services, Housing, and other offices.

"We've truly built an advocate community here at Texas State, with members from across campus, including people at the director level," Dr. Norton says. "We've got therapists, high-level administrators, and we brainstorm, and they really contribute. Some of them take kids into their homes at times. They understand the realities already, so when a crisis occurs, they're clued in.

In their words:

"I first met Dr. Grant and learned about this program at orientation. It helped me a lot when I first started out, financially, in terms of being able to buy books, and in terms of belonging. I've made individual friends, and we've got a strong bond. I had thought about just going straight into the workforce, and not even doing college. But this program has helped me succeed here."
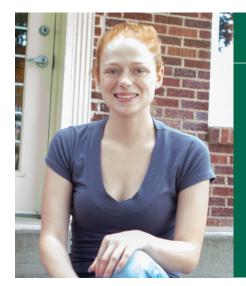
— R'Lexus, Texas Woman's University

"All the resident advisors get some training on the needs of this population," she continues. "If a student is [reluctant] to talk to their academic advisor, for whatever reason, we can find them an adviser who already knows about the set of needs these students have. We have allies across campus, and it is so important."

Dr. Monica Mendez-Grant, vice president of Student Life at TWU, sees the matter the same way. "From financial literacy to career placement to academic advising to housing and on and on, an integrated approach creates the best chance for success."

POINT OF CONTACT

Even when there are advocates on campus and multiple departments are willing and able to remove obstacles for FACES and Frontiers students, the students often still feel reluctant to talk to strangers about problems they face, or to trust that they'll get friendly help in navigating the administrative complexity of college life.

In many cases, they've been conditioned not to ask for help because they've often not received it. For example, Sarah says, "When I was applying for financial aid, I was in care, and there was nobody to help me understand the million things you need to know. I had to struggle with my FAFSA three times because my foster status meant that there were different boxes to check, and I found the whole thing confusing and frustrating."

Any student can feel thwarted by the occasional inefficiencies that come with a large organization, or by the impersonal nature of bureaucratic departmental policies. If one office is telling the student that meal plan payments are due now and another office is saying that financial aid disbursements are delayed, how should the student proceed? If the student entered the wrong field on a registration screen and wound up in Engineering 201 instead of English 201, what's the best way to proceed? Figuring out how to navigate these kinds of experiences is an important part of what students learn in college.

In their words:

"I ran away from home because my mother was on drugs. I was homeless, and then later I was in a foster home. When I came here and became part of Frontiers, it was a huge help. At first I was resistant, because I didn't want anything to do with being labeled for having been in foster care. Now I'm in my third year in the program. And the more I've been part of it, the better it gets. I'm learning basic skills in life that I was never taught before. And socially, when we get together, it's really good."

— Davina, Texas Woman's University

8

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

For these students, however, a lifetime of negative experiences can inculcate a low sense of confidence and a high expectation of futility. If they lack a trusted person to bring problems to, a vicious circle is likely to emerge, wherein the student fails to get needed help when there's a question or problem, thus creating more problems.

And problems already abound—from food insecurity, to a lack of health insurance to academic struggles to emotional fallout from previous trauma—but if the students don't trust that help is available, they won't seek it. Dr. Norton says, "Most of these kids have been worked over by bureaucratic systems. Here we hope to give them a voice and support."

Given these obstacles to success, a single point of contact is a huge benefit to the students, and one that any advocacy program may do well to emulate. In the case of these programs,

a graduate assistant was often the first point of contact and provided students with someone to listen to problems and help them identify possible solutions and resources. They could make appointments to get the appropriate help from the appropriate offices, and often accompany students to the appointments. Even better, in doing all these things with a student, the graduate assistant models for the student how to solve life's inevitable speed bumps and setbacks. That kind of example may be something the student has never experienced.

The students we spoke with all expressed how important it was for them to have a known, trusted, first place to go when problems arose.

"So many of these students have never had a solid support system," Robin Head, interim director of Institutional Advancement at TWU, says. "Now they do, and of course it makes a difference."

In their words:

"I felt uncomfortable about the whole idea of this program at first, because I don't want to make my identity all about these bad experiences I've had. But what I realized is that I needed this, needed to have someone understand my story. Here's an example: I was in a class exercise where we were talking about budgets and priorities, and the example was you are a single mother with three kids, and here's the amount you make, and here's what rent costs, and here's what groceries cost, and what will you do? For me, it was triggering, because this class exercise was more or less the story of how my mother came to give us up. Nobody in that room was going to relate to my experience. But in Frontiers, my story isn't so weird. Maybe they'll just cry with me, and listen, and support me."

— Sarah, Texas Woman's University

Services

Both programs provide this at-risk population with a wide range of support, including:

Tutoring

Students cite tutoring as a huge resource, and say that it's crucial to their academic success. They note that the turbulence in their previous experiences (for example, many children in foster care change schools many times and can fall behind academically) made college-level work a struggle, but they add that tutoring helps them master difficult concepts as well as learn better study habits.

However, tutoring won't help if the students don't go. Having tutoring hours available on a set schedule in a comfortable room, with snacks, was high on the list of best practices the programs uncovered.

Mentoring

Mentoring has the potential to help the students gain the tacit knowledge that other college students have picked up along the way, and the students have alerted the university staff to the importance of additional mentoring.

"There's so much we haven't learned, basic stuff that a parent would teach," Kassandra, a Frontiers participant at TWU, says. "How to manage money, for example. Just skills that you need in life."

At Texas State, the Student Affairs office has matched 20 faculty and staff mentors to foster care students. These mentors have undergone extensive training and screening, fully internalized the strengths perspective that yields the best results, and become available to the students as an additional resource. They may have lunch together sometimes, or talk to the students about academic, career, or personal goals.

All of the kinds of things a parent might do for a college student—ask how a particularly tough assignment is coming along, be proud of the student for an important accomplishment—are things that mentors do. The relationship fills a void in the students' lives, and improves their chances for success.

Community events (with food included)

Casey, a FACES participant at Texas State, says, "For us, we feel like a sore thumb, like our difference is super obvious. But here we get a sense of belonging." Social events, especially when they include food, which people tend to bond over, create a feeling of togetherness, and of being understood. R'Lexus, a Frontiers participant at TWU, explained that the feeling of community expands from these events into daily life. "When we all get together, it's really good," she says, "and then each new friend becomes somebody else that you see on campus and talk a little, just 'Hi, how's it going,' and so on."

This may manifest as a movie night, or pizza and board games, or any other fun activity, but what's happening is not just fun. This aspect of the programs works synergistically with every other component. When the students feel connected with each other and with the program (and often particularly with the graduate assistant) they are more likely to, for example, avail themselves of tutoring, or open up about difficult matters. Fitting in, trusting that people care, and all the other social benefits of recreation and fellowship activities are key to student success.

Healthy relationships counseling

Many foster care alumni have experienced neglect and abuse. They've experienced instability. The relationships they've seen modeled have been chaotic. By example, the relationships they form through FACES and Frontiers can help counteract that. Further, having discussions about boundaries, expectations, and other parts of healthy relationships can help students think in different ways about their interactions. These discussions can happen in individual or group counseling sessions. They create a space for students to process how they want the relationships in their lives to work.

10

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

Book stipends

Concrete financial help, such as book stipends, is foundational for the students. Robin Head, interim director of Institutional Advancement at TWU, observes that, even with Texas' tuition waiver for this population, money is always a problem. "This specific help makes a huge difference," she says.

"This is one of the best representative examples of the idea that only a holistic approach will really help, that if you haven't done everything, you haven't done anything. Free tuition does not secure an education for someone who cannot afford books," says TWU's Dr. Mendez-Grant.

Access to technology

In the 21st century, access to technology can be as important as books when it comes to academic achievement. Students with extremely limited budgets are at the mercy of every tech glitch on an outdated laptop when it comes to completing assignments and doing basic web research. Access to technology helps level that playing field.

"What was wrong with my old creaky computer? Everything!" Kassandra says with a laugh. "Having a good laptop turned that frustration around for me." Providing the students with a dedicated working laptop that they do not have to check out is a best practice.

Holiday break housing

In understanding the level of need for this student population, few issues speak more profoundly than break housing. Most college students have no problem with dormitories closing when school is not in session. For this group of students, though, break housing is essential, because the students are at serious risk for homelessness with no family to stay with over holidays.

Dr. Mendez-Grant explains: "I want our students to be thinking about self-actualizing. I want them to aspire to high levels of achievement and fulfillment, yet these at-risk students were having to worry about fundamental needs, like 'will I be homeless over winter break when the dorms close?' Being able to remove that worry, and other basic worries like it, is crucial."

Making housing available when school is out of session for students who have aged out of foster care has required the coordination of multiple departments at both Texas State and TWU.

A theme that emerges in discussing the impact FACES and Frontiers can have on these young lives is the understanding that only an intensive intervention on multiple fronts can work. It bears reiterating. If a student has a book stipend but is homeless when school is not in session, success is unlikely. The willingness of these universities to enact institutional change makes a world of difference.

Navigating Resources

While students who have had largely negative experiences with bureaucratic and administrative interactions may be reluctant to ask for help in managing campus life, they also may need that kind of help managing life more broadly. Students need help knowing what resources are available to them and how to get access to those resources. Some students experience food insecurity, for instance, but don't know how to apply for benefits through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, sometimes called "food stamps"). Some students can't get an apartment because they don't have a relative who qualifies to co-sign a lease. "These situations come up all the time, and Dr. Norton can direct us to the right person, or write a letter for us, or actually walk with us to the office of somebody who can help," says Casey, a Texas State student. Again, the intersection of practical knowledge and a personal connection seems to be where real help takes place.

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

11

Conclusion

We began with Sarah's experience of feeling triggered and isolated because of a well-intentioned class activity, an experience that recalled for her a traumatic experience and intensified the feeling of being an outsider. Her experience started that way, but it didn't end that way. Because of these programs, Sarah was able to talk things through with someone who understood, to lean upon her resilience and her community, and to turn an alienating experience into one that built a connection. "Nobody in that classroom was going to relate to my experience. But in Frontiers, my story isn't so weird," Sarah explains. "I can talk about these things. Maybe they'll just cry with me and listen. They support me. We're there for each other."

12

Building Community, Breaking Cycles:
A Case Study of Two Programs Benefitting Texas College Students Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care

Online resources for campuses

"Fostering Success Coaching" by Fostering Success Michigan:
http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/news-events/fostering-success-coaching

Foster Care to Success: http://www.fc2success.org/

Education Reach for Texans: http://www.educationreachfortexans.org/

Aging Out Institute: http://agingoutinstitute.com/general-resources/

Department of Family and Protective Services, "Texas Youth Connection":
https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/txyouth/default.asp

Foster Care Transition Toolkit, U.S. Department of Education:
https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf?utm_
content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=

FACES: https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf

Frontiers: https://www.twu.edu/foster-care-alumni/

About Trellis Foundation

Founded by Trellis Company (formerly TG), Trellis Foundation is a public charitable organization built on a 40-year heritage of supporting students and families in Texas who are pursuing their educational and career dreams. We focus on improving attainment for low- to moderate-income students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to earn a postsecondary credential or degree.

To learn more about Trellis Foundation, visit **www.trellisfoundation.org.**

Contact:

Kristin Boyer
Director, Philanthropy
(800) 252-9743 ext. 4518
kristin.boyer@trelliscompany.org

Jenny Achilles
Program Officer, Philanthropy
(800) 252-9743 ext. 4993
jenny.achilles@trelliscompany.org

TRELLIS FOUNDATION™

www.TrellisFoundation.org