# Foster Youth In College

Brandi Lindenmuth
blind569@live.kutztown.edu

Recommended Citation

Lindenmuth, Brandi, "Foster Youth In College" (2020). *KUCC -- Kutztown University Composition Conference*. 19.
https://research.library.kutztown.edu/compconf/2020/2020/19

Brandi Lindenmuth

It was a milestone graduating high school, then I had the chance to prove that I am going to be better than where I came from by attending Kutztown University. The summer passed in a flash and it was the official day I moved to college as a freshman. It took 45 minutes to travel to the campus and a total of 10 minutes to remove my boxes from the car and check in. Once I got everything out of the car, I said my goodbyes to my foster parents, and they got back into the car and drove away. It took me a total of 25 minutes to set up and decorate my side of the room with how little I owned. By 11 AM that day, I was officially moved into my dorm room. I met my roommate for the first time around noon. She walked in carrying a medium sized box and her mom walked in after her carrying a similar looking box. A couple minutes later her dad walked in carrying a large box labeled "clothes." My roommate and I talked for five minutes getting to know each other, all the while her parents continued to bring in box after box. After we introduced ourselves, she went to help her parents bring in her belongings. I offered to help, but they all said that they could handle it. I sat on my bed watching them all come in and out of the room for the first 15 minutes. For the next hour and a half, I sat on my bed scrolling through the internet and watching Netflix. They completed decorating her side of the room, making her bed, moving the furniture, and putting her clothes away. She finished the rest of her side later that evening.

As a product of the foster system, my experience isn't unique compared to others from the system. Graduating high school is a feat for foster youth, let alone enrolling into community college or a four-year university. Without the proper support, foster youth are set free into the world and expected to be independent and successful. This disadvantage carries over to the

college transition, many don't enroll into college due to lack of financial aid, lack of family support, and lack of preparedness, academically and emotionally.

Some foster youth switch high schools frequently and have gone to more than three. This disruption causes them to have broken academics, repeated subjects, and missed information that is important and crucial preparation for college level classes. In an article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in 2017, author Kelly Field discusses that 50 percent of foster youth receive their high school diploma or a GED, but only three percent enroll into college. Field states that in 2017 there were 400,000 youth in the foster system. Three percent of foster youth enrolled into college, of that three percent, less than 30 percent earn their degree within six years. Forty percent of low-income students receive their degrees within this time. This sets foster youth students behind low-income students. Low-income students live in families under the poverty line and receive financial aid to have the opportunity to go to college. Foster youth are sometimes also placed in low-income families, but they don't receive the same support as low-income families. Foster youth lack the support of family, financial aid, and readiness for college.

For foster youth, transitioning into college is difficult because of the lack of support received and offered. In many cases the student is a first-generation student, they're the first of their family to go to college. While the student is the first to go to college, they don't know what to expect and they're not prepared because their guardian, or guardians, can't share and prepare the student for what college is going to be like. The path to graduating is long and hard, but in order to make a difference, it's the only choice some foster youth have.

Many of the stories told about foster youth in higher education are negative, but what about the success stories? For example, Felicitas Reyes, a former foster youth who graduated

college at the University of Southern California with a 3.8 GPA. Johnny Dodd published this article in 2017, *People's Magazine*, to raise awareness of the success foster youth can have in higher education when given the correct support systems. Dodd quoted her saying that her college graduation was "especially sweet" because "the odds were against her." She was proud of coming out on top. In the article Reyes discloses that she and her seven siblings were shuffled between foster homes while their "mother battled with drugs and alcohol." For any child having to go through this situation, it takes a toll on them. She said that she knows the only way to have a better life is "to create her own success." For her to make a new life for herself and her siblings, college was "the only way to go."

Success for foster youth is possible, especially if they have the support of programs aimed specifically at their needs. One such success story is me, Brandi Lindenmuth, a sophomore at Kutztown University and an advocate of the Providing Resources and Opportunities for Future Standouts (PROFS) program. Like Reyes in Dodd's article, I struggled with being placed in and out of foster care. Coming to college, because of my grades in high school, I felt as if I was inferior compared to other students. As a former foster youth trying to keep my head above the water, I knew the only way to create my own path was to go to college. The biggest fear for me was being inadequate for colleges. The biggest challenge for me was focusing on classes while my mind wandered to what my housing would be over break, or the thought of "what if my family was here," or the constant thought that I wasn't ready for college. Every one of these thoughts manifest in a unique challenge, for foster youth in college, in some way or another. Which is why being a part of the PROFS program has helped because not only is it a support financially, but it has many other support systems that help ease the fears of foster youth.

My story of student success, and the success of many others, is a product of a scholarship program offered to foster youth in college. This program focuses on the specific needs of foster youth and uses these needs to support the students in ways that will influence them to exhibit positive behaviors towards attending college and continue to fight for what they want to achieve.

At Kutztown University, the PROFS program is a scholarship program offered to foster youth to support them while they work to receive their college degree. Some of these support systems include financial aid or information about it, family uplifting or mentorship, help with transportation, and many other benefits. For me personally, the family uplift is what helps me the most. Coming into the office to ask guidance from someone who's already gone through college is helpful because they've already been where I am, they can help me when I hit a wall. They act as a pseudo parent and guide me as I wander down the trail of college making sure I stay on the path. I love coming and talking to my mentor about my day and being able to get whatever I need to off my chest. They are there to listen and advise whenever someone needs help. This program has provided me with a family of people who all understand me, that is more than I can ask for.

A benefit provided by the program is an opportunity to get a driver's license. Many foster youths don't have their license and that holds them back from getting internships because they can't drive. Even before a PROFS student has their license, if a student has a medical appointment, or such, and they don't have access to transportation, they're given transportation to that appointment and back. Another benefit is the trips we go on. For example, this past semester we went to the beach. For many on the trip, it was the first time they had ever gone to the beach. Another benefit provided for students is break housing. We have our housing covered over breaks, so we have somewhere to go when school lets out. There is no longer that constant

fear that any one of us will be homeless over a break because we have a place to stay and call home. Colleges should provide programs such as the PROFS program that focus on the specific factors that influence and encourage foster youth to pursue and succeed in college.

In the article, *Pathways to College for Former Foster Youth: Understanding Factors That Contribute to Educational Success*, published in 2005, author Joan Merdinger talks about the two biggest achievements in a foster youth's academic career. They are graduating high school and going to college. Which is a strong argument because looking back on Field's article, 50 percent of foster youth graduate high school and only three percent enroll into college. As I walked the stadium to receive my own high school diploma, I felt as if I was on top of the world. Graduating high school was an enormous achievement for me because my biological mother dropped out due to her grades and no motivation to continue her education. My biological father dropped out of school for similar reasons, so when I shook hands with the principal and was handed my diploma I felt as if I was already making my own success. I was already doing more for myself compared to who I was born into.

There are many factors that influence the decision of enrolling into a college. According to Merdinger's findings, some that foster youth find most important are information about financial aid, college prep classes, advisement about college, and lastly, preparation, or lack of, for independent living. Without information of financial aid leaves a student up in the air trying to figure out how they're going to pay their tuition. For me personally, if I didn't take a college prep class, I wouldn't have been ready to take college math classes. Math is not a subject I understand easily, but with this class I was able to comprehend the basics of college math. Along with preparing for college, talking with my guidance counselors about my fear of choosing the

wrong college helped because they guided me to make the decision to attend Kutztown University. Kutztown is where I belong.

For myself, and many other foster youth, preparation, or lack of it, of independent living is a huge factor of attending college. In order to take care of myself, I had to learn how to do my own taxes, how to cook, and how to find a job to provide an income. I found it a challenge to make friends as I moved to college because I was already providing for myself and the people, I talked to still depended on their parents for many things. I had a hard time trying to talk to them without one of them complaining about something their parent(s) did or didn't do. I would get upset internally a lot because I would have loved to have parents that helped provide for me or would do things for me. I was totally alone coming to college, but everyone is at their own point in life and I'm where I am. This aspect of myself is what drove me to attend college, yes, I am alone, but no, I don't have to end up in a similar situation my biological parents were placed in with me. Using the information of what foster youth, in their perspective, feel are the most important factors influencing their decision, colleges can more effectively serve individuals who experienced the foster care system.

In order to understand the factors that encourage foster youth to pursue and succeed in higher education, we need to look at these factors through the perspective of foster youth. In an article written by Nerissa LeBlanc Gillium, in 2016, published in the *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, Gillium researches the academic outcomes of foster youth and the factors that play into them. The three factors that are investigated are personal characteristics of those individuals and sources of support. Personal characteristics of an individual usually strongly depend on their experience in the system. Gillium states that foster youth develop "unhealthy perceptions of themselves" because of the system. These perceptions can be detrimental to a youth's decision

about postsecondary education and prevent them from moving forward with their academics. If it wasn't for my will to be better than my biological parents, I would most likely not consider college, I would have most likely moved right into the workforce. The next factor are the sources of support. These sources can come from different places such as financial aid, housing assistance, or something as simple as an advisor helping a student choose classes to take for the next semester. From my own experiences, the guidance of an advisor helping to choose classes is critical in your academic career. Without this guidance I don't think I'd be on the right track to earning my degree. I would be helpless choosing classes because I wouldn't know what to take first, then next, or in the future. The smallest form of support goes a long way to keep me on track. This support can be provided by programs designed to help foster youth succeed.

In some community colleges, there are programs that provide foster youth these needs, they help these students to transfer into four-year institutions where the students can be successful.  In the article, *Personal Perspectives on Providing Services to Foster Youth*, Keyon Whitman describes that there are six foundations that foster youth need to achieve academic success. These foundations are "easing concerns about costs, supportive networks in schools and communities, navigation of systems, trustworthy information, college knowledge, and family uplift." Easing concerns about costs for students helps the student to feel more sound by allowing them to focus less on finances and more on their academics. The next foundation of "supportive networks in schools and communities" helps guide students on a path to success, socially and academically, and to create that success themselves. The third foundation is "navigation of systems." You can use the example of an advisor and their advisee meeting to choose classes for the next semester. Without the advisor's help the student may not choose the correct classes and may find a lot of difficulty trying to navigate their class schedules and path towards graduation.

When students receive "trustworthy information" the student can fully understand and learn about a college, even life skills. They can look back on this information and use it to build upon their own experience. The fifth foundation is "college knowledge." Many, if not all, foster youth coming to college have no idea what they're getting themselves into. They don't know what it's about and what is required of them. For example, they may not know how to fill out the necessary forms and applications for financial aid or how to apply to college. For me, no one was there to teach me how to fill out my first FAFSA, so I had no idea how to answer most of the questions. I also had to ask my guidance counselor from high school to help me apply to colleges because I didn't know how to do that either.

The guidance has helped me get where I am today and I'm in college because of it. The last and, I believe, most important foundation is "family uplifting." When a student is in need, they should have family to fall back on. For many foster youths, there is no family to fall back on, it's just that one person, all alone. Over breaks, they'll go homeless because there is nowhere, they can go, they can't get loans cosigned, because there is no parent or responsible adult in their lives to be able to do that. Without that support of family, they are all by themselves and they don't have anywhere to go.

All these foundations are a great base for a program that offers each source of support to a student to encourage them to move forward and achieve what they want and aim to do.

Which is why I will continue to argue that colleges should have programs to provide these needs to foster youth because receiving a college degree opens opportunities that foster youth are otherwise restricted to. But how can foster youth attain higher education if the resources provided are not offered or not attainable for that individual? Foster youth can succeed,

they just must be provided the resources and support and stability. After that, they will grow and achieve great things.

As a foster youth, I aim to make a difference because I would never want someone to go through a situation like what I had to go through transitioning into college. In the beginning, it was school last, income and stability first, and everything else second. I struggled staying in college, but I made it past my first year and now I am growing and earning my success. I can accredit this success to the PROFS program at Kutztown. I feel secure here at Kutztown because of this program. I have no doubt in my mind that I would have dropped out without this program. I would have become just another statistic, and I'm happy that I'm not, I'm happy that I am on the right path towards success. I found a place where I belong, a place where I can give back and in return get the support, a mentor who helps me get over the road blocks I get stuck at, and most importantly I found a family.

As a foster youth and as a human being, I am proud of the connection the students and advisors all have in the PROFS program. We are open, generous, and all are accountable for one another. We each want to succeed, but we want all of us to succeed, together. No matter what we're going through ourselves, we are there for one another. And no matter what, it doesn't matter who you were born to, it's who is always there and supportive. That is family, and without that, there is no hope in the world that there will be differences made.