

Seven Life Domains Overview: A framework to support College Students from Foster Care

Youth and alumni of foster care lag far behind their peers in educational achievement. Compared to the general population of young adults, individuals who grow up in foster care are less likely to graduate high school (50% vs. 70%), and those who are college-qualified are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education (20% vs. 60%).¹ By age 26 years old, only 3% of alumni from foster care have graduated with a 4 year college degree compared to 24% of the general population.²

The obstacles to thriving and succeeding in college for youth and alumni of foster care go well beyond academic achievement and college preparation. Adverse and traumatic childhood experiences owing to child abuse and neglect, separation from family and siblings via foster care placement, a caseworker managed childhood, multiple changes in schools, caregivers and living arrangements are a few conditions that alter how young people from foster care learn to perceive the world and relate to others.

Casey Family Programs³ identified seven domains as part of the *It's My Life* framework, which was developed to organize support services for young people preparing to make the transition from foster care to adulthood successfully. At Western Michigan University, the campus-based support program for students from foster care, known as the *Seita Scholars program*, adapted the Casey framework such that education is the central focus of program support offered to students but stability in other life domains is integrally tied to the understanding of what alumni of foster care need to thrive and succeed in college (see Figure 1).

Young people in the custody of the state foster care system are characterized by multiple at-risk or underserved population classifications that are typically targeted for additional support in higher education. For example, most youth in foster care grow up in poverty, identify as a racial “minority,” and are first generation college students. The burdens of foster care are in

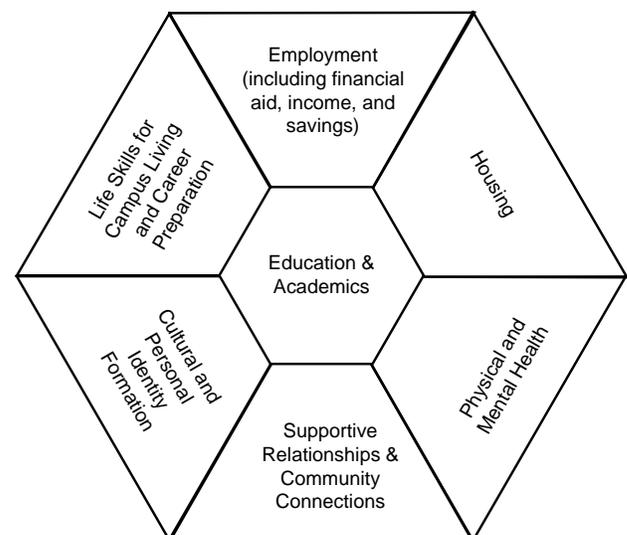


Figure 1: Seven life domains framework to support college students from foster care at WMU

addition to the challenges implied by these other classifications. The Seven Life Domains framework offers a way to organize, understand and develop a response to the complexity of the lives of youth and alumni of foster care who are transitioning into young adulthood through the college experience. Below is a sample of challenges observed and identified anecdotally by various Seita Scholars over the first four years of the program. Many of these observations are confirmed by research.

1. ***Academics and Education***: Instead of a family network of support, youth transitioning from foster care to college rely on systems of support which may include courts, state agencies, Medicaid, and Community mental health. Without family support, youth find it more difficult to prepare for postsecondary education and nurture aspirations for educational achievement. Placement changes during the foster care experience are often accompanied by changes in schools and result in disrupted relationships with educators and interrupted learning. Students from foster care enter college with lower ACT and high school GPA scores.⁴
2. ***Housing***: Securing safe, affordable and stable housing is a challenge for youth who age out of foster care since most have no one to co-sign a lease. Without a permanent childhood home to return to, many youth from foster care “couch surf” or experience homelessness during semester breaks at college. If a youth is able to attend community college, campus housing options are unavailable. Students face the challenge of finding an affordable living arrangement in the community, accessible to school, work, social supports, and other services. Attending a four-year college for many Seita Scholars means four years of housing stability on campus.
3. ***Finances and Employment***: Youth who age out of foster care are classified as independent according to federal financial aid standards. Their foster care status qualifies them for grants and scholarships that reduce the amount of loans needed to pay for a four-year college education. Other state supports help foster youth with start-up independent living costs up until the age of 21 years old. Research indicates that young adults who have aged out of foster care are less likely to accumulate assets, including savings accounts, checking accounts, and car and home ownership.⁵ The majority of Seita Scholars are not prepared to manage the responsibility of managing finances in lump sums as paid out by financial aid, nor are they prepared to systematically save funds, financially plan for the future or complete responsibilities such as filing annual tax returns. Employment struggles are common for young adults from foster care, especially in earning a living wage. Financial hardship is a by-product of low wages. Young adults from care experience higher rates of eviction and homelessness.⁶

4. ***Physical and Mental Health***: Most children in foster care have grown up experiencing abuse and neglect, as well as conditions of poverty such as poor nutrition and living in unsafe neighborhoods. Young people from foster care are more likely to suffer from health and mental health conditions. Post-traumatic stress is common, sometimes experienced at higher rates than returning war veterans.⁷ Multiple placement changes can mean new medical providers with a variety of treatment styles. Psychotropic medication is frequently prescribed for youth in care.⁸ Medicaid is available to youth aging out of foster care up to age 21 years old.
5. ***Social Relationships and Community Connections***: The foster care system is designed to remove children from their family of origin because of assessed safety concerns and temporarily places them in another living arrangement (e.g., kinship family, foster family, group home) until reunification or adoption occurs. If neither outcome is achieved, then emancipation from the system happens at 18 years of age unless the young person opts to remain in voluntary foster care, which in Michigan extends support up to 21 years old. The experience of foster care disrupts relationships with family and complicates relationships with adults since many professionals enter the child's life. Youth in care have difficulty establishing a supportive and consistent relationship with an adult. Adult support is often changing, with new placements, caregivers, and caseworkers.
6. ***Personal and Cultural Identity***: Young people growing up in foster care tend to hide the fact of their foster care status for fear of stigma and being treated differently by others. It is worth noting that Seita Scholars, when in the company of their peers on the college campus, do not report the same level of stigma. Young adults often build identity from the traditional concept of family. The degree of contact with biological family may vary between youth, but most report maintaining a connection with siblings.⁹ Many grow up believing that education at a four-year university is beyond their reach.
7. ***Life Skills***: Young people growing up from foster care often have to “grow up faster than their peers.” This may result in them having acquired some independent living skills such as doing laundry, relying upon oneself to problem solve and packing belongings at an earlier age. However, many youth in foster care learn a sense of “pseudo-independence” as they are abruptly launched into independence upon exiting the foster care system¹⁰.

At WMU, campus coaches are full-time employed as the primary support for students from foster care. Coaches are trained to engage students as partners and together work to identify areas of struggling and thriving within each of the seven domains. This framework for assessment is then used to help each student plan long-term—4 years—to graduate from college and prepare for career transition. The framework is also used to help students manage and problem solve day-to-day challenges that emerge as part of the typical college experience. Students learn to identify

their strengths and challenges and how to prioritize when multiple problems surface at one time, a common experience among college students from foster care. With assessment information for each domain, coaches continue to work in partnership with students to identify strategies to learn new skills and habits within targeted domains. The coach assists the student in understanding how maintaining balance in all domains is integral to success in college.

¹ Wolanin, T.R. (2005). *Higher education opportunities for foster youth: A primer for policymakers*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.

² Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

³ Casey Family Programs (2006). *It's My Life: Postsecondary Education and Training*. Author: Seattle, WA. http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/pdf/ItsMyLife_PostsecondaryEducation.pdf

⁴ Unrau, Y.A., Font, S. & Rawls, G. (2012). Readiness for college engagement among students who have aged out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 76-83.

⁵ Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

⁶ Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

⁷ Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2007). *Voice 2: Discussing Issues and Concerns of Michigan Foster Youth*. <http://jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/Voice%202.pdf>

⁸ Courtney, M. E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 1-61

⁹ Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

¹⁰ Samuels, G.M., & Pryce, J.M. (2008). "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger": Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1198–1210.