



## Comprehensive residential education: A promising model for emerging adults in foster care<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

A comprehensive residential education program for high school foster youth (the Academy) is examined as a potential model for emerging adults transitioning from foster care. Analyses of secondary data were conducted on outcomes for 478 alumni who attended the Academy over the past 10 years. Outcome indicators for safety, significant relationships with adults, and well-being exceeded national and state standards and were predicted by Academy programs and the amount of time spent at the Academy. The Academy provides a model of stable, comprehensive care that may help foster youth successfully emerge into adulthood. Study limitations are also discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Federal and state child welfare policies are shifting to better address the needs of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. The federal *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008)* mandates improvements to services for transitioning youth and provides options for states to offer additional services, including extending foster care for youth beyond 18 years of age. In general, the new federal law recognizes the needs of foster youth in early adulthood to have strong support services and significant relationships with others in order to experience healthy outcomes. This new law contrasts with previous federal policy directions of urging independence and self-sufficiency for foster youth by 18 years old, such as the *John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (1999)* and *Title IV-E Independent Living Program (1986)* (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Stein, 2012).

With the passage of the *California Fostering Connections to Success Act (2010)*, California is one of the first states to use the federal Fostering Connections legislation to extend care of foster youth from 18 years old to age 21 years old at the discretion of the individual youth. Although the federal and California Fostering Connections legislations are just beginning to be implemented, the passage of these laws is partially due to a robust research and practice literature of the past few decades

describing poor educational, employment, and well-being outcomes for former foster youth (e.g., Barth, 1990; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Font, Rawls, & Unrae, 2012; Pecora, 2012; Shook et al., 2013; Stott, 2013; Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). Overall, the research and practice literature indicate that youth who “age out” of foster care at 18 years old are at great risk of less than ideal health, mental health, and social welfare outcomes, including high rates of substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness, and unemployment (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Havlicek, Garcia, & Smith, 2013; Osgood et al., 2010; Stott, 2013; Zlotnick et al., 2012).

To better assess the needs of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood, the federal National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) project is currently being implemented across the country by individual states (Children's Bureau, 2012). Funded by the *John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (1999)*, NYTD is a longitudinal study that is gathering data on foster youth at 17 years old and then again at ages 19 and 21 years old. States are surveying foster youth and former foster youth regarding six outcomes:

1. Financial self-sufficiency
2. Experience with homelessness
3. Educational attainment
4. Positive connections with adults
5. High risk behavior
6. Access to health insurance

Although the longitudinal NYTD data will not be fully collected and analyzed for several more years, the NYTD outcome questions further reflect the need to sustain the federal child welfare services' goals of

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safety, significant relationships with adults, and well-being (*Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997*) for foster youth beyond the age of 18 years old. The national need for answers to these questions arose from research and practice literature on foster youth (e.g., Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011; Smith, 2011; Stott, 2013; Zlotnick et al., 2012) and other populations of “emerging adults” in the United States (Arnett, 2007; Furstenberg, 2010), which collectively conclude that consistent support and significant, positive relationships with other people are critical to youth and young adults for healthy development, as well as for ongoing safety, permanency, and well-being such as health, education, and employment (Allen, 2008; Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Barth et al., 2007; Lawler, Shaver, & Goodman, 2011; Osgood et al., 2010; Pecora, 2012; Smith, 2011). Although emerging adulthood is acknowledged as a distinct developmental period from approximately 18 years old to 25 years old (Arnett, 2000), applications of this developmental construct across different cultures and sub-populations, including current or former foster youth, should receive further testing to better understand the specific needs of youth transitioning to adulthood (Mann-Feder & Koch, 2013; Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelcu, 2013). New federal and California policies recognize that emerging adults who are foster youth or former foster youth may need services for extended periods of time, emphasizing “interdependent” living, rather than independent living (Smith, 2011).

### 1.1. Academy program description

One program established to address the needs of emerging adults in foster care is the Academy, which is believed to be the nation's first comprehensive residential educational program created specifically for foster youth in or entering high school. Founded in 2001 and located in California, the Academy delivers an array of services to its students through its parent organization and in partnerships with the County Department of Health and Human Services, County Office of Education, and Workforce Partnership. Additionally, the Academy was developed with the support of a range of community leaders, including the County Board of Supervisors, County Child Welfare Director, County Office of Education, and the Presiding Juvenile Court Judge, as well as groups of stakeholders such as attorneys, social workers, healthcare providers, educators, law enforcement, former foster youth, and other community members.

The Academy aims to provide a safe, stable, and caring environment where youth can work toward their high school diplomas, prepare for college and/or a vocation, and develop independent living skills. Further, the Academy was designed to be a place its students can call home, providing stable relationships needed for development of social skills and future relationships during their student experience at the Academy and beyond.

The Academy programs are delivered in four general components: residential, educational, work readiness, and child welfare services. The residential program provides family-style homes with house parents for up to eight youth per cottage. Through an intergenerational program, foster grandparents, who live on the campus for reduced rent, mentor the youth and engage them in school tutoring and other activities such as cooking, crafts, gardening, and art. The role of the foster grandparents includes sharing their wisdom, insight, friendship, and experience with the youth. Comprehensive health services, including behavioral health, are available to the youth through the on-campus health and wellness center. Housing for Academy alumni is available on-campus along with other supportive services to advance youth's goals of higher education or employment.

The County Office of Education operates the Academy's on-site high school program. The school's curriculum is based on the standards and entrance requirements for the University of California and California State University systems. Extracurricular activities include student government, California Interscholastic Federation athletics (e.g., baseball,

basketball, football, softball, track and field, and volleyball), yearbook, and dances. Classrooms are equipped with modern technology.

Through the Workforce Partnership, the Academy offers a work readiness and self-sufficiency program, including tutoring, career counseling, job training, internships, employment, and elective school courses such as business skills, computer applications, and multimedia skills. Additionally, Workforce Partnership staff assist students in creating resumes and portfolios for use in the college admissions process as well as employment interviews.

With on-site offices at the Academy, County Child Welfare Services provides social workers and a supervisor to address case management for Academy youth's dependency cases. In addition, social workers provide services and advocacy for youth as needed.

### 1.2. Evaluation questions

Recent federal and state policies pertaining to foster youth recognize a strong consensus in the research and practice literature that foster youth continue to need support as they transition into adulthood. Additionally, the specific developmental needs of emerging adults who are or were in foster care require further assessment. The Academy aims to provide safety, significant relationships with adults, and well-being for foster youth emerging into adulthood. Thus, the evaluation questions of Academy alumni focus on the goals and outcomes of federal foster care policies:

1. Does the Academy provide safety, significant relationships with adults, and well-being for its students?
2. Does the Academy produce educational well-being outcomes for its students that exceed standards?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants included 478 alumni of the Academy, ranging in age at entry from 12 years old to 19 years old ( $M = 15.6$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). The participants included all who youth attended the Academy between February 2001 and June 2011, and left the program between July 2002 and July 2012. The sample contained 214 males and 264 females. The ethnic breakdown of participants was 32.2% Caucasian (Non-Hispanic), 32% Hispanic, 27.5% African American, and 8.3% other. A sub-sample of 302 of these alumni who reached 18 years old or older at the Academy was created to analyze outcomes for those youth who were able to participate, with approval from the Court, until or beyond legal adulthood. Additionally, the sub-sample had more available outcome data due to program completion, whereas the full sample had unavailable outcome data (e.g., high school graduation, post-high school education, employment) for youth who were discharged before their 18th birthday to other living arrangements (e.g., family reunification, foster family care). The subsample of youth older than 18 years at time of discharge included 127 males and 175 females, ranging in age at entry from 12 years old to 19 years old ( $M = 16$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). The ethnic breakdown of these participants was 31% Caucasian (Non-Hispanic), 31% Hispanic, 32% African American, and 6% other. By Academy admission standards, all participants ( $N = 478$ ) were dependents of the Court, in foster care, and considered to have had difficulty maintaining prior placements. Youth were excluded from admission to the Academy if they had extensive, severe mental health problems such as fire-setting, significant and ongoing substance abuse, and chronic assault behaviors, or had been sexual perpetrators.

### 2.2. Procedure

Following approval from the Institutional Review Boards of the authors' institutions, data were gathered by Academy staff between

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