The Seven Things We Have to Overcome

1. Poor High School Education

Many youth in foster care struggle with college from the get-go because they haven’t had access to high quality high school academic programs or they have moved so often that they simply could not catch up. As a result, many are behind and have to take remedial classes which cost time and money.

2. Financial Struggles

College is expensive and the skyrocketing tuition has hit everyone who wants a college degree. Youth in care rarely have the resources to finance a college education, making them fully reliant on loans and scholarships. It is critical that youth in care be exposed to the scholarships that are available to them and that they understand the financial aid process.

3. Stereotypes

As odd as it may seem, stereotypes can and do play a role in whether or not youth in care complete college. It’s called the “stereotype threat” and it’s an all-too-real phenomenon that hampers the success of many youth in care. For many, the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype or doing something to inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype can become a crippling fear. This fear can result in self-doubt, ambiguity, and stress that sometimes results in a loss of motivation, feelings of not belonging, and even acceptance that the stereotype is true.

4. Lack of Advisement and Support

Nothing illuminates just how poor advisement and support is for youth from foster care at most schools like an example of a school that is getting it right. At most colleges, youth in care do not have open access to mentors, coaches, support groups, and academic advisement, but there are many schools that are changing that, realizing that providing these kinds of services is one of the easiest and most successful ways to improve the completion rates of youth from foster care. Advisement and support can make a huge difference, and with many colleges not providing the right kind of services, minority completion rates continue to suffer.

5. Lack of On-Campus Engagement

It isn’t just academic life that helps keep students enrolled at colleges or drives them to drop out. Social engagement also plays a major role in keeping all students, but especially minorities, in school through graduation. Research has shown that when students get involved in campus activities, build relationships with their peers, and feel that they belong on campus their chances of dropping out fall significantly.
6. Family History

Plenty of people become the first in their family to graduate from college, but to pretend that coming from a background of college graduates doesn’t play a role in college success is disingenuous. Graduation rates of non-first-generation students hover around 55%, creating a huge disparity between those who come from college-educated families and those who do not. Because first-generation students are less likely to be academically and financially prepared for school they are four times more likely to drop out. We can help change this!

7. Low Expectations

The schools that have been the most successful in improving their graduation rates for youth in foster care share a common strategy: they promote equity and high academic achievement in all students, regardless of background, and provide the academic and social support necessary to help students to meet that goal. Students are more likely to stick with school and perform better while in school when they are challenged and expected to succeed.

Students need to feel that they were accepted to a school because they can do well. Success breeds success.