

Building a data sharing network of scholarship programs for alumni of foster care summary

Pilot phase process and findings

In order to help strengthen the capacity of scholarship programs to systematically gather and examine data on their recipients, Wilder Research and Casey Family Programs launched the Foster Care Alumni Scholarship Benchmarking Network (Network), a data sharing initiative. The Network consists of a common database into which participating programs pooled data on their programs and scholarship recipients. The participating programs included scholarship programs designed specifically for youth who have been in foster care. This report describes the process of launching the Network and presents preliminary findings based on data collected in the pilot phase.

Project description

Goals

Goals of the data sharing initiative included the following:

- Improve tracking and documentation of outcomes for scholarship recipients (e.g., retention in program, graduation rates) and factors that may contribute to or hinder their success.
- Report aggregated overall and individual program outcome results for scholarship recipients.
- Increase understanding of the factors that contribute to outcomes for scholarship recipients, including the impact of support services.
- Provide data that programs can use to compare themselves to other programs.

Project phases

Two project phases were initially proposed:

- In the pilot phase, a small set of programs pooled together data they had already collected on their five most recent cohorts of scholarship recipients.

- A second phase was initially proposed but has been suspended until additional funding is secured. In the second phase, the Network would be expanded to include more scholarship programs. The programs would agree to collect a common set of data elements and provide data on an ongoing basis.

Participating programs

Seven scholarship programs participated in the pilot phase. A scholarship program is defined as a program that provides any type of financial support towards schooling, school-related expenses, and/or living expenses students incur while in college. In addition to financial support, the participating programs also provided a variety of non-financial support services. For the pilot phase, the network included only programs designed specifically for youth who have been in foster care. The participating programs were as follows:

- Casey Family Scholars Program, funded by Casey Family Programs and administered by the Orphan Foundation of America
<http://orphan.org/index.php?id=30>
- Continuing Education and Job Training, administered by Casey Family Programs
For more information, contact John Emerson at jemerson@casey.org
- Coaching-to-College Program Scholarship, administered by Treehouse for Kids
http://www.treehouse4kids.org/whatwedo/coaching_to_college
- College Sponsorship Program, administered by United Friends of the Children
http://www.unitedfriends.org/programs/prog_ed_u.html
- Renaissance Scholars of Cal Poly Pomona
<http://www.dsa.csupomona.edu/rs/>

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- Washington State Governors' Scholarship, administered by the College Success Foundation <http://www.collegesuccessfoundation.org/gs/>
- Youth Education Scholarship, administered by the Silicon Valley Children's Fund <http://www.svcf.org/programsandservices/educationprogramsandservices/yes/>

Developing the Network

The participating programs were asked to provide their feedback, through both formal and informal means, and to review decisions throughout the pilot phase. Their feedback helped shape the design and implementation of the Network.

- An all-day meeting was held to discuss the development of the Network.
- The participating programs produced a list of research questions to guide the initiative.
- Two documents were drafted – the project charter and data sharing agreement – to establish common understanding and agreement regarding the project goals and expectations.
- A project website was developed to facilitate ongoing communication and improve collaboration and information sharing across Network members. However, web participation remained low, due in part to the timing of when the website was introduced.

Data

Network members were asked to provide two types of data: 1) program data, and 2) scholarship recipient data.

Program data

Participating programs were asked to complete a web-based survey, which requested information about the details of their programs.

Scholarship recipient data

The pilot phase focused on recipient data that had already been collected by the programs. Participating programs were asked to provide individual-level scholarship recipient data on recipients from the five most recent cohorts (2002-03 through 2006-07).

The data request was developed based on the variables that were commonly collected across programs and

that were determined to be of potential value for answering the guiding questions. In total, 52 variables were requested.

Most of the programs found it somewhat challenging to provide the requested information, and there was a large amount of missing data. The percentage of variables for which the programs were able to provide at least some information (out of the 52 total requested) ranged from 63 to 100 percent of the variables. Further, data for some of the variables programs were able to report on were available for only some of their recipients. Specifically, the percentage of information provided per scholar ranged from 19 to 100 percent of the requested variables, with an average of 61 percent. Very little information was available on recipients' academic performance. In fact, only three of the programs were able to provide any academic performance data on their recipients. As a result, academic performance information was available for only 8 to 16 percent of the recipients in the Network, depending on the measure. This missing data situation severely limited the data analysis possibilities.

Key findings

Scholarship program components

- All the scholarship programs indicated having the following goals: increasing college retention, increasing college completion, providing role models, and advocating on behalf of youth in or alumni of foster care.
- The most common eligibility criteria were high school graduation (or the equivalent), completion of the federal application for financial aid (FAFSA), and submission of letters of recommendation.
- Four out of the seven programs indicated that admission into their program was competitive. Nevertheless, acceptance rates were high (more than half of eligible applicants) for the four programs that provided the requested information.
- The total number of recipients (new and returning) in 2007-08 ranged from 77 to 350 among the four programs that provided the requested information.

- The amount of financial support provided varied considerably by program. Four out of six programs indicated that their scholarship was a “last dollar” scholarship, covering the student’s unmet need after other financial aid sources are taken into account.
- Expenses most commonly covered by the scholarship programs included tuition, fees, textbooks, school supplies, and transportation costs.
- The following support services were provided by all of the scholarship programs: college readiness workshops or orientations, celebration or recognition events/dinners, emergency support, advocacy, academic advising, monitoring of academic progress, internship opportunities and/or connections, career counseling and information, and referrals to other resources not provided.
- The majority of the support services were provided directly through the scholarship programs, either alone or in conjunction with partners.
- The frequency with which program staff typically had contact with recipients ranged from “several times a year” to “more than once a week.”
- Programs varied in the percentage of contact they had with recipients that occurred face-to-face (vs. through mail, email, or phone), which ranged from 1 to 75 percent.
- Among the programs that provided financial information, there was large variation in total program expenditures and in the proportions spent on scholarships, administration, and support services.
- The areas of highest need for additional resources or improvement across the Network were “tracking early exiters” and “program evaluation.”
- Programs’ most common evaluation activities included monitoring student progress while students are receiving the scholarship, tracking college graduation, and conducting recipient satisfaction surveys.

Scholarship recipient characteristics

- Of the 1445 scholarship recipients, females accounted for two out of three.
- The largest racial/ethnic groups were Whites (37%) and Blacks (33%), followed by Latinos/Hispanics (14%), Asians/Pacific Islanders (6%), Native Americans/Alaskans (4%), multicultural (3%), unknown (2%), and other (1%).
- Recipients ranged in age from 15-38 years old at the time of program entry, and the median age was 19.
- Almost all of the students had a high school diploma or equivalent, and only 14 percent had previous post-secondary experience before entering the scholarship program (although previous post-secondary experience was unknown for about half of the students, so the actual percentage could be higher).
- The majority of recipients (62%) attended four-year colleges and universities, 29 percent attended community and/or technical colleges, and only a small percentage (4%) attended vocational schools while in the scholarship program.
- Likewise, the majority of the students (68%) were pursuing a bachelor’s degree, 16 percent were pursuing an associate degree, and 7 percent were pursuing a vocational certificate or license. In addition, 15 students were pursuing advanced degrees (i.e., master’s, doctoral, or professional).
- Almost three-quarters (72%) of the recipients attended public institutions, while 17 percent attended private non-profits, and 5 percent attended proprietary institutions.
- The most common majors pursued were those in the social sciences (13%), medicine and allied health care (13%), and business (11%).

Academic performance and program completion

Information on academic performance (GPA data) and progress (units and Satisfactory Academic Progress) was available for only a small subset of the Network students (8-16% of the students, depending on the measure). In addition, the following outcome measures are not perfectly precise due to gaps in available information. Definitions of outcome measures and descriptions of limitations are provided in the body of the report.

- On average, cumulative GPA at the end of the first year was 2.6 and final cumulative GPA was 2.7.
- Scholarship recipients earned an average of 84 percent of the units they attempted.
- About half of the students (51%) made Satisfactory Academic Progress in every term for which the information was available, whereas the other half were off track at some point.
- Among students from the 2002-03 entering cohort who had enrollment information available by year at minimum, the largest drop in enrollment occurred between the first and second academic years (100% to 56% enrolled).
- The programs provided information on their recipients' education status as of the end of the 2006-07 academic year. Over half of the students (55%) were last known to be enrolled in school, 13 percent had graduated, and 6 percent were known to have exited from college without completing their programs. The remaining 26 percent of the students had an unknown education status.
- If these education status results are adjusted to distribute the 26 percent with unknown status across the other status categories, the results show that an estimated 60 percent were still enrolled, 24 percent had exited college before completing, and 14 percent had graduated.
- Degree earned was unknown for the majority (68%) of the graduates. Among those for whom the information was provided, 84 percent had earned a bachelor's degree.

Factors associated with outcomes

Data limitations severely restrict our capability to explore factors associated with recipients' outcomes. Due to the amount of missing information, it is not possible to examine how multiple factors simultaneously play a role in the outcome of interest (e.g., scholarship program *and* recipients' characteristics). Instead, it is only possible to examine one factor at a time at this point.

Scholarship recipient characteristics

- While males performed about as well as females academically, they appeared to be slightly less likely to stay enrolled in college.
- No significant differences were found when comparing recipients based on their primary language (English vs. not English).
- The percentages of students who had graduated and who had exited before completing were similar among the racial/ethnic groups. On the other hand, there were significant differences in the percentage still enrolled, which was highest among students of other races/ethnicities (71%), followed by Black students (60%), White students (53%), Latino/Hispanic students (51%), Asian/Pacific Islander students (49%), and Native American/Alaskan students (38%). The status of many students (10-50% by racial/ ethnic group) was unknown.

Post-secondary experience

- Significant differences were observed by cohort in the percentages who were still enrolled and who had graduated, following the pattern that would be expected given the number of years the cohorts have been enrolled.
- Students who entered the scholarship programs with prior post-secondary experience appeared to have somewhat of an advantage over students without prior experience in cumulative GPA at the end of their first year and current education status.
- Students pursuing a bachelor's degree appeared to have a significant advantage in staying enrolled and completing their programs compared to students pursuing associate and vocational degrees. However, the significantly higher percentage with an unknown education status among associate and vocational degree students makes it difficult to interpret the results with confidence.
- In comparison to students who never earned summer units, those who did appeared to have poorer academic performance, yet appeared to be more successful at completing their programs.

- Students attending private non-profit institutions performed better academically than students attending public institutions and were more likely to be enrolled or have graduated than students attending public or proprietary institutions. In addition, students attending public institutions were more likely to be enrolled than students attending proprietary institutions.
- Among Black, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American/Alaskan students, those who attended an ethnically designated college (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic universities, tribal colleges) earned a significantly lower percentage of units attempted and were significantly more likely to have exited before completing compared to those who did not attend an ethnically designated college. It is unknown how differences in the composition of students attending such institutions may have influenced these results.

Scholarship programs and components

Analyses comparing results of individual programs focused primarily on the three programs that provided the most complete academic performance data.

Differences in results by program are discussed in the body of the report. There is some evidence to suggest that the composition of recipients within a program, in terms of their educational backgrounds and goals, may be associated with recipient outcomes.

As expected for the pilot phase, limitations in the amount and quality of data provided limited our ability to examine the association between recipient outcomes and program components. Without being able to control for the differences in recipient characteristics across programs, and without being able to account for the differences in support services received by individual students, it is difficult to identify which aspects or components of the programs themselves are associated with recipients' success.

Future direction

The second phase of the Network has been suspended due to an unexpected cut in project funding. A variety of suggestions are provided for consideration if the Network can be continued in the future.

Suspended pilot phase activities

As a result of the funding cut, some activities originally planned for the pilot phase were suspended. These activities should be reconsidered if the Network continues in the future:

- **Establish an advisory board of stakeholders** to provide input and guidance in the ongoing development of the initiative and to ensure that the project is sensitive to the needs of youth formerly in foster care.
- **Create a web-based reporting system** that participating programs can access to download aggregated reports based on their program's data and benchmarks based on the data from other member programs.

Original plans for Phase II

A number of activities were originally planned for Phase II that would be worth consideration if the Network continues in the future:

- **Invite additional programs** to participate in the Network. The addition of more programs will bring larger numbers of recipients and wider ranges of variation on potential factors, which will enhance the data analysis possibilities of the Network.
- **Expand data collection** by establishing a core set of variables to collect on an ongoing basis. The variables would be selected based on Network member feedback and input from a variety of sources (literature, research experts, practitioners, etc.). Guidelines for collecting these measures would also be established. In addition, programs may want to consider collecting data at more time points throughout the year. Expanding data collection will improve the Network's ability to examine the guiding questions.

- **Systematize the data pooling process** to make it less cumbersome for the program staff and research team. The process should be made as systematic and automated as possible to limit the amount of work done by hand and time required.
- **Establish the self-sufficiency of the Network.** One suggestion is to establish membership dues to help cover the core costs of processing, storing, analyzing, and reporting the Network data.
- **Improve completeness and quality of data collected on scholarship recipients.** A number of strategies could be undertaken to minimize missing data and improve the quality of information collected. Some examples include building validation rules and format templates into data entry databases, improving access to information stored in databases by developing queries and restructuring, limiting the use and storage of paper forms, maintaining frequent contact with scholarship recipients, and keeping documentation of variable definitions and instructions for extracting information. Implementing these strategies, among others, will help improve the Network data and increase analysis possibilities, hence enhancing the Network's ability to examine the guiding questions.

Additional recommendations for Phase II

Some additional recommendations based on lessons learned in the pilot phase include the following:

- **Provide training in evaluation capacity building.** In order to ensure the integrity and quality of the information collected, the Network should consider providing program staff with accessible and relevant training to help build their evaluation capacities.
- **Improve measurement of program services** by establishing more specific definitions of what constitutes each service and by requesting information on how commonly each service is provided (number of recipients receiving the service, number of times received, hours of service received, etc.). To ensure consistency and minimize missing data, it may be preferable to collect this information through an interview process rather than through a web-based survey.
- **Build Network reputation and funder buy-in.** Establish a reputation for the Network among funders as a reliable source of quality information so that funders will request Network results, thereby streamlining program staff's evaluation activities to satisfy funder requirements.
- **Secure additional funding** for the continuation of the Network.



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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Building a data sharing network of scholarship programs for alumni of foster care*. This summary and the full report are available at www.casey.org/ednetwork or www.wilder.org/report.html?id=2085. For more information about this report, contact Jennifer Lee Schultz at Wilder Research, 651-280-2677.

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