School Counselors, Foster Care Alumni, and College Degree Attainment: An Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) Approach

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Abstract

Foster care alumni (FCA) face several challenges in their pursuit of post-secondary education, including the instability of their high school experiences, the greater risk of summer melt, and institutional hurdles they face once they have arrived on-campus. Utilizing an Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) approach, the authors summarize the extant research and provide examples of how school counselors can best prepare students for the variety of obstacles they may experience. Specific implications for school counseling practice and research that can further promote success for FCA are also identified.

Keywords: foster care, college counseling, school counseling, Advocating Student-within-Environment, college degree attainment, youth transitioning from foster care

The benefits of a college degree cannot be understated, especially for marginalized students (Chan, 2016). For foster care alumni (FCA) a postsecondary education can offset some of the early challenges they have experienced and unlock life-changing opportunities (Day et al., 2021; Hanson et al., 2023; Skobba et al., 2022). While diverse in their specific experiences, FCA share a similar identity: they are transitioning from childhood to adulthood without having been adopted or reunited with their birth families (Leathers et al., 2020; Nathans & Chaffers, 2022). They have similar college-going aspirations as their non-fostered peers, yet do not see the same graduation rates. As many as 70-80% of FCA wish to attend college, but between 1% and 11% graduate with this level of education (Beard & Gates, 2019; Gross et al., 2020).

The barriers to FCA enrolling and persisting in college are broad, overlapping, and deeply complex. Although other marginalized student groups may experience academic under-preparedness, mental health issues/trauma, disability status, and/or financial instability, this specific group of students faces a unique combination of difficulties that make college enrollment and persistence feel nearly impossible (Dumais & Spence, 2021; Gross et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2023). Students entering adulthood straight out of foster care must grapple with the lasting emotional impacts of their upbringing and the academic challenges brought on by different home/school placements, as well as adjust to independent living without a familial network (Horn, 2020; Watt & Faulkner, 2020). While their more-privileged peers can rely on the financial or social capital of their family or community, youth coming out of foster care placements usually do not have the same resources and also have to overcome numerous specific disadvantages (Geiger et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Many FCA are further marginalized by intersectional identities, such as being first generation college students, low income, and/or Black/Indigenous/People of Color (Gross et al., 2020; Massachusetts Court Improvement Plan [MassCIP], 2019). Relatedly, there is no point at which these students are "free" from the burdens or barriers of their unique contexts—meaning tailored, comprehensive support is required throughout their education, all the way to college graduation (Watt & Faulkner, 2020). Common solutions, such as academic-year housing, merit scholarships, or remedial coursework, fail to fully address the larger contexts of the FCA experience (Jones & Varga, 2021).

Given the interconnected nature of these persistence barriers, FCA need additional resources beyond individual, college-level support programs. School counselors are well positioned to help students develop strategies and skills to navigate the college-going process, as we deliver multiple services across relevant domains for students—providing academic resources, postsecondary information, social/emotional support, guidance, and much more (American School

Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). We suggest that school counselors who use an integrated systems-based approach are better equipped to conceptualize and address the unique concerns of FCA during this key transitional period out of foster care placements and into post-secondary education. In this article, we give a brief overview of Advocating Student-within-Environment theory as a frame for our discussion, identify specific college persistence barriers for FCA, and provide school counseling strategies that can improve the likelihood of FCA success in college.

School Counseling & Advocating Student-within-Environment

The Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) theory articulates how school counselors can use relationships and networking to have influence with the interconnected systems of students, school, community, and wider socio-political landscape (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). With a foundation in social justice, ASE emphasizes the importance of developing student agency and self-advocacy efforts to create opportunities for students to develop their capacities, expand their critical consciousness, and address oppressive structures (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). Within this framework, school counselors deliberately seek student input, with the goal of empowering them to learn how to advocate for themselves, with our support. This model also encourages us to consider the ways that multiple social contexts—including families, schools, peer networks, communities, and government agencies—are impacting student lives. While individual perspectives matter, they are profoundly shaped by our experiences and environments.

Central to ASE is the idea of agency, with special attention paid to the ways in which power dynamics or hierarchies can shape student and adult agency (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014). Everyone holds their own "human agency," which can come together to form "collective agency." In some cases, dysfunctional systems or structures can prevent individuals from exercising the full potential of their agency; this is where someone with systemic power, such as a

school counselor in the school context, can utilize "proxy agency" to advocate with the student and uplift marginalized voices. According to ASE, school counselors move through several nested "layers" or "levels" in their work, including but not limited to individual reflection, individual/group/classroom interventions, school climate efforts, and community-level advocacy (Johnson et al., 2023; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024).

Across these different levels, school counselors are guided by the "5Cs": curiosity, connectedness, co-regulation, compassion, and contribution (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). Ultimately, the 5Cs and the intersecting levels of influence act as a frame from which school counselors can operate: establishing connections among members of the community, aligning students and the school environment to support emotional co-regulation, leading with curiosity and compassion, and contributing to positive changes in schools, communities, and the larger world (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024).

ASE has been used in several contexts, in concert with a broad range of school counseling interventions, including mindfulness (Ceballos et al., 2021; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021), consultation (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2023; Molina et al., 2022; Molina et al., 2024), social determinants of mental health (Johnson et al., 2023), social/emotional and executive functioning interventions (Bowers et al., 2020), and Student Success Skills (Bowers et al., 2015; Villares et al., 2023). Because of its flexibility, non-pathologizing nature, emphasis on collaboration, inherent focus on social context factors, and connection to evidence-based practices (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019), ASE is a valuable framework for school counselors working with youth transitioning from foster care into postsecondary settings.

Foster Care Alumni Challenge: Meeting Basic Needs

Access to college requires financial stability and the capacity to pay for tuition, fees, housing, food, transportation, and books/materials, all of which can vary year to year or semester to semester

(Watt et al., 2019). While financial aid can help students with some of these costs, FCA more frequently have to ongoingly negotiate between paying for basic needs (such as rent or food) and paying for required materials necessary to succeed in their classes (Day et al., 2021; Geiger et al., 2018; Watt et al., 2019). Many students work during the semester to cover costs, but FCA are more likely than their peers to work over 20 hours per week, requiring better time management skills and balance between their academics and employment (Gross et al., 2020). Those who work full time often struggle to incorporate academics into their schedules because of the high time-related demands of each task (Havlicek, 2023; Horn, 2020; Watt et al., 2019). Ultimately, many students report feeling like they have no choice but to neglect their academics or drop out to ease these financial burdens (Hanson et al., 2023; Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Skobba et al., 2022).

Academics are not the only thing impacted by these occupational demands. Students with busy schedules tend to miss out on campus community building or cultivating social networks that can benefit them long-term (Skobba et al., 2018). Those who work during business hours are typically unable to visit campus support offices that could be instrumental in supporting them to persist and navigate their work/school responsibilities (Horn, 2020). Some FCAs report being unable to afford both school fees and housing costs despite working full time, making the task of persisting nearly impossible (Hanson et al., 2023; Skobba et al., 2022).

At some point in their transition out of foster care, a high number of FCA will also experience housing issues (Skobba et al., 2018; Skobba et al., 2022; Watt et al., 2019) and challenges securing consistent, nutritious meals (Dumais & Spence, 2021; Geiger et al., 2018). Financial aid, housing assistance, or discounted meal plans are frequently proposed to address these basic needs, yet on-campus options are often closed to students over winter and summer breaks, leaving students to their own devices for safety and sustenance during those times (Liu, 2020; Skobba et al., 2022). Occasionally, students can access resources through Campus Support Programs (CSPs) and

government-based assistance such as Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs), tuition waivers, or Extended Foster Care, but these opportunities are not available in every state or on every campus (Hanson et al., 2023; Okpych et al., 2020; Watt & Faulkner, 2020). FCA typically do not have access to families or a "home base" they can return to during these extended periods (Kim et al., 2019; Leathers et al., 2020; Okpych et al., 2020). If these resources are not provided to students year-round or are not included in their financial aid packages, students must be creative to find alternative food sources or safe spaces to stay (Dumais & Spence, 2021).

Each creative solution to housing and food insecurity comes with additional burdens or challenges. If campus housing options are inconsistent, FCA may search for off-campus options or alternative living arrangements; many end up living in their cars, relying on shelters, or depending on their peers through "couch surfing" or "doubling up" in unofficially shared spaces (Skobba et al., 2022). Those fortunate enough to secure off-campus housing solve the issue over breaks, but they must ensure they have the funds to pay rent each month and secure consistent transportation to/from campus (Geiger et al., 2018; Havlicek, 2023; Lopez et al., 2022). If students cannot access dining halls or consistent meals, they may rely on food pantries or cheap meal options—but finding them can be time-consuming, unreliable, or unhealthy (Ruff et al., 2022). Others opt to skip meals altogether (Skobba et al., 2022). Though most common over academic breaks, students continue to navigate these issues during the semester with unexpected fees, rising costs, or surprise evictions threatening their access (Jones & Varga, 2021; Skobba et al., 2022). It is an endless cycle: when their basic needs are unmet, students will sacrifice learning time or cope with hunger and housing insecurity to the detriment of their academic outcomes (Skobba et al., 2022). With the costs of higher education jeopardizing their ability to meet basic needs and compromising their wellbeing, it is unsurprising that a majority of students who have been in the foster care system drop out rather than persisting to their degree (Day et al., 2021).

School Counseling Strategies: Preparing Students to Meet Future Basic Needs

To best support FCA through the transition from high school to college, school counselors can prime themselves to be agents of curiosity in the school and community environments (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). This allows us to sensitively collect information about student needs, and to understand when interventions are (or are not) serving a student. Counselors may need to ask "difficult questions" when working with FCA—after all, it is difficult to know exactly how to advocate or support someone without understanding their needs and the challenges that lie ahead (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Singh et al., 2010). Each student will have unique experiences within the school or foster care system, requiring dynamic responses (Dumais & Spence, 2021; Gross et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2023). With a full picture of the student's situation, the counselor is better able to tailor their advocacy efforts, while the student can develop some critical consciousness about the systemic and institutional barriers at play (Hines et al., 2020; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Singh et al., 2010). From there, students and counselors can collaborate on solutions that address these complex opportunity gaps (Jones & Bubb, 2021).

As a "proxy" agent, school counselors can also advocate for in-school resources that support students through this transition (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014: Schaeffer et al., 2010). While we may not be able to solve the housing and food crises that lie ahead, we can support students in searching for post-secondary options that fulfill their aspirations while meeting their needs. We can encourage FCAs to reach out to former foster parents, extended family members, or friends' families who may be able to provide occasional support during college breaks or crises. There are often caring community members willing to be helpful, but they may not know of the need. We can make sure that FCA (and all students) are aware of the multiple systems of support—Student Deans, mental health services, learning disability services, housing, and so on—at many colleges and

universities. Knowing about the resources that are available makes it more likely students will access them (Millett et al., 2018; Pace et al., 2018).

With many scholarships or funding opportunities linked to academic performance (Havlicek, 2023; Millett et al., 2018), counselors can positively impact students' later financial stability by prioritizing high school academic support and interventions. For example, school counselors can develop advisory periods, after school study spaces, or study halls to support youth who struggle to find time or space to complete their homework outside of school (Day et al., 2021; Jones & Varga, 2021; Liu, 2020). If students are employed outside of school, school counselors can implement work-study programs so that students who have outside responsibilities can earn credit for their experiences.

Counselors can be influential in the college application process as well. A dedicated space in the school building with college information, computers, and resources for completing the college application process can potentially increase application rates (Bowen et al., 2009). We can collaborate with students during the search process, providing information about schools that fulfill students' aspirations while also meeting their needs for housing and food support (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011). Table 1 contains national resources that are helpful for finding out about colleges and scholarships.

Table 1
College and Scholarship Information Resources Source

Source	Resource Title	Website
The U.S. Department of Education	College Scorecard	https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/
College Board	Big Future	https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/
Princeton Review	College Search	https://www.princetonreview.com/college-search

Peterson's	College Search	https://www.petersons.com/college-search.aspx
Unigo	College Match & Scholarship Search	https://www.unigo.com/
CollegeXpress	College & Scholarship Search	https://www.collegexpress.com/
College Data	College & Scholarship Search	https://www.collegedata.com/

The US Department of Education's *Foster Care Transition Toolkit* (Gu, 2016) and the Legal Center for Foster Care Education's (2014) *Blueprint for Change* also provide useful information and ideas. For example, if a student will not have access to housing outside of foster care, they will not be able to live on a campus that only provides semester-to-semester housing. School counselors can support students in finding campuses with year-round housing options, or search for tuition waivers or scholarships that can be used on off-campus housing using the resources in Table 1 (Kim et al., 2019; Leathers et al., 2020; Okpych et al., 2020).

One key housing solution for FCA is extended foster care, which provides funding for students to remain in their placement through the age of 21 as long as they meet specific academic or occupational requirements (Leathers et al., 2020; Okpych et al., 2020). This allows students to delay elements of their independence, similar to many of their non-fostered peers (Kim et al., 2019). For example, transition-age youth in Massachusetts may opt into extended foster care if they are employed or pursuing postsecondary education full-time (Juvenile Law Center, n.d.)—but these existing services are not accessed as often as they could be because many students do not know about them (Gu, 2016). In cases where these programs already exist, counselors can make sure FCA are informed about options, and can advocate for changes to make them more accessible: changing them from opt-in to opt-out, removing the full-time requirements, etc. (Kim et al., 2019). In states

without these programs, we can advocate for creating them, citing examples from other states to demonstrate effectiveness and cost-efficiency (Wiegmann et al., 2014).

Connecting with community members beyond the school may alos prove to be useful in facilitating a smooth transition to college (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Curry & Milsom, 2021). Some states provide transitional foster youth with Independent Living Coordinators that support students in organizing themselves, setting goals for their transition, and staying on-track to graduate and enroll in postsecondary institutions or the workforce (Kim et al., 2019; Nathans & Chaffers, 2022). Students who receive these kinds of services are better prepared for financial disruptions, academic challenges, and mental health needs, all of which can potentially derail their academic progress if unaddressed (Kim et al., 2019). School counselors can collaborate with these professionals to identify ways to build relevant skills across contexts that support student functioning and achievement. Depending on the students' placement or familial involvement, it may be helpful to pull in caregivers (families, foster parents, caseworkers, etc.) to do this work as well (Day et al., 2021; Hines et al., 2020).

Another key, untapped resource is other foster youth or FCA—identifying others who are working through or have gone through similar struggles who then ultimately succeed can be inspiring for current foster youth in pursuing their goals (Burton et al., 2021; Destin et al., 2018). Connecting students to their older peers who have achieved a college degree or who are successfully navigating these challenges may prove to be beneficial, as students see it is possible for them to achieve similar goals (Destin et al., 2018; Hagler et al., 2024). Similarly, older students may benefit through the development of their leadership skills and role modeling (Gunn et al., 2017). Affinity groups also prove to be useful in school environments, as they can foster a sense of belonging for marginalized students within the larger school community (Beasley et al., 2024). Counselors may opt to create a counseling group with FCA in the same school, district, or community to help students

connect with peers that are facing similar challenges and to identify creative solutions to shared roadblocks. For marginalized students, collective agency can be incredibly powerful in addressing their needs (Clemens et al., 2017; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024).

Beyond the school or wider community, counselors can advocate for two major pieces of legislation that are instrumental in promoting positive student outcomes: extended foster care (EFC) and education and training vouchers (ETVs) or tuition waivers. ETVs are one of the most common ways in which the federal government promotes access for FCA, yet the distribution of these vouchers is left to the states (Watt & Faulkner, 2020). Meanwhile, tuition waivers are only provided by about half of all states and come with a host of eligibility requirements or applications (Gross et al., 2023; Hanson et al., 2023). In many cases, these waivers or vouchers do not cover the full cost of attendance, or they have strict GPA requirements that do not allow for extenuating circumstances (Gross et al., 2023; Hanson et al., 2023; Watt & Faulkner, 2020). Counselors can make sure FCA know about these resources and also advocate for looser eligibility criteria or more equitable distribution of funding for both EFC and ETVs to support FCA in achieving their postsecondary goals.

Foster Care Alumni Challenge: Academic Placement and Support

While the connection between high school performance and college acceptance is abundantly clear, foster youth's K-12 experiences uniquely impact their acceptance into and persistence through college (Clemens et al., 2018; Wiegmann et al., 2014). Not all foster care placements are created equal: if students do not have their basic needs met, whether safety/food/shelter or mental/emotional needs, they may not have the capacity to focus on their academic performance (Clemens et al., 2017; Jones & Varga, 2021). Depending on their situation, some foster youth may be in multiple foster placements in a county or the state, with related

transfers between K-12 schools (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Liu, 2020) Unsurprisingly, more frequent

school transitions lead to lower educational achievement for youth in foster care (Clemens et al.,

2016). Even with common state standards, schools may have different graduation requirements,

move at different paces, or break up the content in different ways— resulting in difficulties

transferring high school credits or continuing their education smoothly (Liu, 2020). Students in

foster care are also more likely to be enrolled in alternative schools or low-performing schools than

their peers (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Wiegmann et al., 2014). A significant number of FCA drop out

of high school—while those who graduate typically have not taken advanced coursework or have

gaps in their knowledge base that leave them unprepared for college-level courses (Clemens et al.,

2016; Day et al., 2021; Liu, 2020; Wiegmann et al., 2014).

Another outcome of this level of mobility is that FCA may have learning disabilities, mental

health challenges, and health difficulties that are not adequately assessed or identified (Martinez et

al., 2020). School-based evaluations and related diagnoses that can lead to targeted interventions are

a key way students who are at high risk get their needs met effectively in schools (Kothari et al,

2021). School counselors can educate colleagues about the impacts of trauma, and advocate for

psychological assessments with FCA that factor in possible trauma histories as well as the impact of

multiple placements and transitions (Martinez et al., 2020).

Once enrolled in college, FCA continue to face further academic barriers to completing their

degree requirements. If a student did not complete necessary prerequisites or does not place high

enough on placement tests, they will have to complete remedial courses before they can enroll in

their degree requirements (Day et al., 2021; Liu, 2020). While this would ideally fill gaps in their

knowledge base, it can be demoralizing if students perform poorly and have to retake the course

multiple times before they can pass (Day et al., 2021). Remedial coursework is financially

burdensome: students must now take more courses than their degree originally required, and failure

in these prerequisite courses can impact their access to financial aid (Day et al., 2021; Havlicek, 2023; Skobba et al., 2022). Many scholarship or tuition waivers are conditional and based on achieving satisfactory academic progress each semester of receipt (Havlicek, 2023; Skobba et al., 2022). After already facing barriers to entry, losing access to financial aid or repeatedly taking remedial courses can lead students to drop out or suspend their secondary education (Day et al., 2021; Skobba et al., 2022).

School Counseling Strategies: Academic Placements and Support

As a preventative measure, school counselors can collaborate with each other across schools, as well as with families, case managers, and teachers to support students' transition between schools (Clemens et al., 2018; Sugizaki & Iida, 2023). From an ASE perspective, a systemic approach would be to collaborate across the building to establish better policies and procedures for students who are transitioning within and between districts (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014). This can be particularly helpful when working on placement decisions for new students. If students must move between schools or districts, it can be hard for them to maintain a consistent academic level; many times, students must take "easier" courses or repeat those they have already taken because their transcripts do not follow them or their schools have trouble accurately placing students (Liu, 2020). When a school counselor collaborates with teachers in their building or counselors from their student's previous school, more accurate placement decisions can be made to support this transition (Sugizaki & Iida, 2023; What Works Clearinghouse, 2022).

Many in-school resources can support students' academic success throughout high school and beyond. Time and space during the school day to complete homework assignments, access to teachers beyond class time, and work study options can improve academic performance during high school—and thus, long-term postsecondary success (Day et al., 2021; Havlicek, 2023; Jones & Varga, 2021; Liu, 2020; Skobba et al., 2022). From an ASE perspective, creating practices and

policies that allow these kinds of opportunities for student success support the inter-connected wellbeing of everyone in the school. School counselors frequently know more information about their students' home situations than teachers or other school professionals (Tompkins & Mehring, 1993). While it is inappropriate to share this information directly without permission, counselors can use their relationship skills to support the student by advocating for their needs in the classroom or consulting with teachers about which students may need additional support in skill building without providing unnecessary details (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014). School counselors can also advocate for students when they need additional support in the classroom. For example, encouraging teachers to support learning through a trauma-informed lens, and to explicitly support executive functioning skills such as organization, asking for help, and planning and prioritizing in the classroom can be instrumental to effective learning (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). The development of these skills, as well as increased academic content knowledge, can positively impact persistence—thus helping FCA avoiding remedial coursework and improving access to financial aid (Day et al., 2021; Havlicek, 2023; Skobba et al., 2022).

Foster Care Alumni Challenge: Transitions

After graduating high school, there are still a number of hurdles students have to jump through before they can ultimately enroll in and attend college (Castleman et al., 2014). Surprise fees (e.g., health insurance or changes in expected housing costs), paperwork (e.g., housing selection, enrollment forms, federal loan entrance counseling), deadlines (e.g., course enrollment), or other elements pose a significant barrier to students, especially those who do not anticipate these events (Castleman & Page, 2014; Rall, 2016). This "summer melt," or the number of college-going students who ultimately do not enroll at their target institution, claims anywhere from 10-40% of students—especially BIPOC, first-generation, or low-income students (Castleman & Page, 2014; Castleman et

al., 2014; Rall, 2016). While not specific to FCA, it can be assumed based on the identified importance of knowledgeable, connected adults that those without family members or guiding caregivers may miss vital steps to enrollment (Rall, 2016).

For each student, this melt looks different: some delay enrollment by a semester/year, others may decide to enroll in a different institution (such as a community college or public university rather than a private college), and many decide not to enroll at all (Rall, 2016). Depending on available resources, such as college advisors or school counselors, students may end up making different decisions that impact their persistence and long-term trajectories (Castleman et al., 2014). Some students opt for a more "independent approach," in which they do not proactively seek support; these students may miss more of these requirements or may misunderstand necessary communications, ultimately resulting in not attending college (Castleman et al., 2014; Rall, 2016). Therefore, during this transition from foster care and high school, it is imperative that FCA receive support from a variety of knowledgeable, caring adults who are prepared to guide these students through a number of first-time experiences.

Transferring between higher education institutions can also have negative impacts on students' degree completion. Students are more likely to persist when they receive an education from a single four-year college or university (Havlicek, 2023). Transferring between any institution—regardless of the characteristics of the starting and ending college—can decrease the likelihood of persistence and often requires students to spend a longer time working towards their degree (Geiger et al., 2018; Havlicek, 2023; Skobba et al., 2022). Many FCA must start their education at two-year institutions, especially if they lack financial resources, need remedial coursework, or are otherwise unprepared for a four-year institution (Day et al., 2021; Geiger et al., 2018; Skobba et al., 2022). When choosing between institutions, some students opt to begin their education at a community college to cut down on the overall cost of their education (Gross et al., 2023). Unfortunately,

community colleges often have less funding and fewer housing, academic, or social/emotional

resources to offer FCA, all of which negatively impact persistence (Day et al., 2021; Geiger et al.,

2018).

School Counseling Strategies: Preparing for Transitions

With knowledgeable professionals on either side of this transitional period, it can be difficult

to determine who is ultimately responsible for students' continuation of their education (Castleman

et al., 2014). Critically, Castleman, Page, and Schooley (2014) found that support from counselors or

advisors during this period decreased summer melt rates by up to 20%, indicating that school

counselors can continue to make a difference when they provide proactive summer support after

senior year. There is a clear, demonstrated need here, as well as effective school counseling

interventions (Avery et al., 2021; Castleman & Page, 2015). To meet this need, counselors have

advocated for additional hours and financial support for summer office hours so that students can

access their counselor and receive key information in the time between high school graduation and

college matriculation (Castleman, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2015).

School counselors can also help prevent summer melt or transfer challenges by cultivating a

"college-going culture," where educators view all students as having the potential to succeed in a

college environment (Bryan et al., 2022; Bryan et al., 2023). This is especially valuable for

marginalized students, who may not otherwise engage in college counseling or college-related

activities (Bryan et al, 2023). For FCA, this kind of culture can bridge the gap between their current

experiences and their future goals (Bryan et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2019). FCA have reported that they

received negative messages from their foster families, peers, case workers, and teachers about their

potential for academic achievement and post-secondary success (Clemens et al., 2017), so school

counselors need to be a strong positive voice of support and source of information. When students

know the possibilities, they can make an informed choice about whether college is the correct

pathway for their goals rather than opting out of specific opportunities because they do not fit the mold of a traditional "college-going student."

When it is time to begin postsecondary planning, discussion of plans and related barriers can help school counselors in connecting FCAs to applicable resources, developing critical consciousness about overcoming challenges, and moving the school environment to more effectively align with students' goals and needs (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). Part of acting as a proxy agent is supporting students in developing self-advocacy skills and awareness of their circumstances—in the postsecondary planning process, this means making sure that students understand the risks of transferring, the potential for summer melt, and the resources available that can be used when facing these challenges (Castleman et al., 2014; Day et al., 2021; Geiger et al., 2018; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Skobba et al., 2022).

Overall Implications for School Counseling Practice

From an ASE perspective, when we work with FCA, it is helpful to begin with curiosity about our beliefs and level of knowledge about the experiences of these youth. We can hold ourselves in compassion for what we do not yet know and also take an open stance of interest in developing collaborative connections to learn more about the breadth of FCA experiences and placements, whether formal or informal, permanent or transient, and so on (Lemberger, 2010). There are multiple ways to combat any knowledge gaps and promote better outcomes for students: professional development/training, conversations about intersectionality and marginalization, advocating for trauma-sensitive school practices, non-pathologizing language, and so on (Brinser & Wissel, 2020; Cole et al., 2013).

Regardless of a student's history or planned trajectory, school counselors can help them to prepare for the future by providing them with resources and information that increases their

resilience and self-advocacy skills (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). With support, students can build up their personal agency and efficacy as they better understand their circumstances, becoming more prepared to navigate future challenges. Traumatized youth benefit significantly from explicit instruction on a broad range of executive functioning and social emotional skills (Durlak, et al., 2024; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). These broad, transferable skills are beneficial in all contexts, allowing FCAs to use them while preparing for a variety of future outcomes (Durlak et al., 2024).

School counselors—in collaboration with school colleagues—can be instrumental in shifting the school culture to implement school-wide programs to create safer, more supportive, and more engaging communities (Durlak et al., 2024; Goodman-Scott & Ziomek-Daigle, 2022; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). School communities that broadcast the belief that all students can succeed, pay attention to the impact of trauma, promote social-emotional skill development, foster compassion and respect for all people in the building, and generally create a positive atmosphere promote well-being for all involved (Bryan et al, 2022; Kern, 2022; Seligman, 2015).

Beyond the school context, counselors can operate as a stakeholder in the larger community and advocate for broader political, legal, or social support for their students. Schools do not operate in a vacuum and are influenced by the socio-political structure around them (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). Political advocacy can be instrumental in changing the landscape of the school environment, but it is not always feasible in states with fewer job protections; becoming a member of national organizations or donating to causes that fight for student rights are other ways that counselors can advocate for change (Schaeffer, et al., 2010).

It is also vital to recognize that advocacy does not mean speaking *for* students, but rather *with* them. Students need to be able to contribute to their community, whether sharing new ideas, proposing solutions, or urging for environmental or structural changes that can benefit their

opportunity and outcomes (Jones & Bubb, 2021; Lemberger, 2010). This empowerment is part of the process of supporting them to self-advocate and become savvier about identifying what they need and how to attain it (Clemens et al., 2017; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021).

Advocacy is also about balance—we can leverage our knowledge and experience to create change, and we can encourage students to tell their experiences and perspectives so that educators and school systems can more effectively address their needs (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). School counselors can also promote student involvement in decision-making processes at school, thus further preparing them for their future independence (Jones & Bubb, 2021; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014).

Doing this work is not always easy. To be effective and to maintain our equanimity, we need to set measurable and achievable goals for ourselves so we can remain resilient and push through the more difficult aspects of the job. School counselors who take the time to prioritize our own health and wellbeing and to practice self-compassion are better able to support our students (Nelson et al., 2017; Seligman, 2015). This is especially true when we are working with barriers we cannot control or in conditions where we may not see the ultimate result of our hard work. Counselor burnout helps no one (Kim & Lambie, 2018).

Implications for Research

Broadly speaking, further intervention research is needed in school counseling (Whiston et al., 2011). Most evidence-based interventions exist at the elementary or middle school levels, which leaves high school counselors and college-level support personnel with a paucity of rich, evidence-based approaches to their work (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). If counselors wish to provide comprehensive support to their students throughout the college application and completion process, we need relevant interventions and related research so that we have more information about what truly works, especially with marginalized students
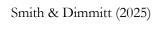
such as FCA. For FCA specifically, the more information we have about key outcomes such as resilience and success in the face of the unique challenges they are facing, the more effectively we can provide services to support students in this situation.

While FCA have complex and individualized experiences, and this can make it difficult to conduct research (Day et al., 2021), it is imperative that we come to understand what is needed to help them succeed and thrive (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Kothari et al., 2021). Ideally, research with FCAs would also address the range of their experiences, especially as it pertains to trends in placements, opportunities, and outcomes (Havlicek, 2023; Watt et al., 2019). In addition to supporting the development of effective interventions, furthering the research base would inform school counselor education as well as professional development programs, so that educators are better equipped to support FCA at every stage of their educational journeys (Dimmitt & Zyromski, 2023).

Finally, information related to FCA support systems or programming in higher education settings needs to be communicated more effectively so that counselors and students can find resources during their college search process. It is not enough for states and colleges to provide these programs—students must know about the support available so they know their options and have full access to all opportunities available.

Conclusion

While school counselors cannot change everything, we can collaborate and advocate to create changes in our school environments and we can educate ourselves about the resources and support that exists for FCA and other marginalized and at-risk student groups. Jones & Varga (2021) put it best: "access without support is not an opportunity" (p. 5). It is vital that our systems do more than open doors for students: we need to be part of a network of caring adults who provide them with both the concrete and the interpersonal resources necessary to accomplish their

goals. Through an integrated, inter-connected, systemic approach, school counselors can contribute

to greater possibilities and related outcomes for all of our students.

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