policy & practice brief

School of Social Work
CENTER FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH
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ISSUE **FIVE**

Federal Pell Grant Lifetime Limit and its Effect on Unaccompanied, Homeless and Former Foster Care Youth

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ABSTRACT The brief discusses the possible effects of the Pell Grant Lifetime limit on unaccompanied, homeless and former foster care youth attending post-secondary education, while also examining challenges that these populations currently face which contribute to the length of time till a degree is earned.

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The Issue:

Federal Pell Grants are generally awarded based on financial need to prospective students who are interested in moving on to post-secondary education. Inarguably, the greatest asset of a Federal Pell Grant is that it has no mandate to be repaid to the federal government[6, 2]. This attribute makes the Pell Grant an undeniable necessity to prospective students who do not have other financial means to pursue a post-secondary credential.

The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1972 began the Pell Grant Program. Historically, funds for the Pell Grant were determined by a yearly appropriations act. In this process, the Congressional Budget Office would determine a yearly grant amount estimate and recommend it to Congress. There have been changes to the funding stream for the Pell Grant; the first being The College Cost Reduction and Access Act occurring in 2007. Yet another change occurred in 2010 with the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act. These updates created a supplemental monetary amount concurrent with the original Pell Grant award. This "add-on" is also funded through an annual appropriations process[1].

In December 2011, President Obama signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012 (Public Law 112-74)[2]. This significantly changes the funding process of the Pell Grant program. Students no longer have access to Pell Grant funding after they have qualified for 6 full years (12 semesters)[6]. Currently, there are no exceptions to this regulation. This adjustment in access to funding likely could create challenges and serve as a deterrent for 'would-be' students deserving of this funding.

Policy Implications

The impact of this new legislation hinders specific student groups from obtaining a post-secondary degree, explicitly former foster care youth and homeless or unaccompanied youth. These youth can have significant cross over and can experience similar challenges when seeking a college degree.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines homeless as "…not having a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes "doubled-up" families that have been forced to seek residence in another person's home as a result of a financial crisis." (Center for Education and Policy Analysis). Many homeless or unaccompanied young adults do not have the guidance necessary for making sound financial and educational decisions. They are forced to focus on meeting their basic needs. This impacts how they participate in higher education. According to the National Center for Homeless Education (014)[8], homeless youth fall behind in

school due to the challenging tension of work and school. This group of young adults experience frequent changes in living situations, coupled with many other challenges, which contributes to missing school and lost credits. These interruptions can lengthen the time needed to complete a college degree, however there is little tracking of homeless youth in post-secondary education programs.

A study done by Day and colleagues found that former foster care youth graduated at a slower rate as compared with their non-fostered, first generation student counterparts, with the median time being 11 semesters from enrollment to graduation[4]. Another study found that, "…only 26% of foster care alumni who enroll in college have earned a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment, compared to 56% of their peers."[3] This means that out of the 26,000 youth who aged out of foster care in 2011, roughly 4,680 are pursuing a degree and only 1,217 would have completed that degree within six years. That leaves approximately 3,463 former foster care youth who are pursuing a degree or certificate without access to Pell Grant funding after the six-year lifetime limit.[3]

Both studies show that homeless and former foster care students do not attend post-secondary education full-time without interruptions[4, 8]. For homeless students, many attend part-time or full-time while working with many interruptions, usually to attend to financial or personal challenges[8]. Former foster care youth also experience periods of interruption due to similar financial and personal challenges[4, 8]. Additional barriers include the fact that many foster youth graduate from low performing high schools or GED programs, which results in the need to enroll in

remedial college courses before they are ready to begin classes that count towards their major.[7] This also contributes to increased time to degree. Former foster care and homeless youth also face the challenge of meeting with college staff who are unfamiliar with the challenges these students face and are not knowledgeable about how to provide assistance[5]. Both homeless and former foster youth face challenges and a severe lengthening of the time needed in post-secondary education, making it very difficult to complete a degree within the 6-year Pell Grant time limit.

Even with programs to assist these populations located at the college or university, many of these students still struggle with family, monetary, and psychological issues. To add one more hurdle or time constraint for funding would make an already laborious endeavor all the more demanding.

Practice Implications:

In order for homeless and foster care youth to obtain a post-secondary degree there should be as few barriers as possible. The Pell Grant Lifetime limit ads yet another obstacle.

A possible solution would be to allow the U.S. Department of Education to make specific exceptions to the lifetime limit for those students who would qualify. This would include those student populations where studies have shown a need for additional time to complete a post-secondary degree as well as those students who show critical financial need.

For further information about the ideas presented here, please contact Angelique Day at ew6080@wayne.edu or visit Wayne State University's Transition to

Independence Program website at http://tipwaynestate.org/

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