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Spotlight on National Foster Care Month

Higher Education Aids Transition to Independence

As of December 2011, the State of Michigan was overseeing the care of 13,893 children in out-of-home care, the seventh highest foster care population in the United States. A critical area of concern for those who work with this population is supporting youth who age out of foster care, a group that typically struggles to attend and graduate from college. A new program at Wayne State University (WSU) aims to improve higher education retention and graduation rates for transitioning youth.

The [Foster Care and Higher Education Transition to Independence Program \(TIP\)](#) provides mentoring, coaching, and other support services to WSU youth who were in foster care on or after their 14th birthday and not adopted before their 16th birthday. Founded in the fall of 2012 and funded by a grant from the Michigan Department of Human Services, TIP is one of nine foster care and higher education programs in the State. It is modeled after [Michigan State University's FAME Program](#). Angelique Day, TIP Director and an Assistant Professor at WSU's School of Social Work, said TIP is one of the largest and most aggressive programs with regard to enrollment rates and the level of comprehensive services provided to students.

In the fall of 2012, Wayne State University enrolled 482 students who identified as being a "ward of the court" as identified by the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid. Of those students, 110 identified as being in out-of-home care on or after their 13th birthday. TIP is actively serving 84 young people this semester who meet the definition—from the [John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program](#)—of youth aging out of foster care and under the age of 25. "Most students enrolled in college become ineligible for title IV-E funded DHS services after their freshman year but are no less in need of intense student support services to ensure they maintain enrollment in school and persist to graduation," said Day.

On average, youth in care move to new foster families three times per year, and these moves often result in a change of school. Because it takes time to recover academically after each school change, many children in foster care lose ground. This is also true for TIP recruits. "Many of the young people in foster care in Wayne County are extremely old for their grade, including several 17-year-olds who are enrolled in the ninth grade," Day said.

She added that TIP is unique because the core service team consists of professionals with personal histories in foster care. "TIP uses an empowerment model that emphasizes leadership and coaching to assist students to see their foster care status as an asset rather than a deficit in obtaining their career goals." She said TIP is the foster care and higher education program with the most established community-based partnerships, allowing the university to provide a cost-effective program.

Child Safe Michigan provides support with mentor training and for faculty and staff who serve as mentors. The 313 Project, an initiative of Michigan Children's Law Center, provides free legal consultation and representation to TIP students. PNC Bank provides financial counseling and financial literacy training to students. The Big Family of Michigan and the Michigan Faith-Based Communities

Coalition for Foster Care Youth support the program by providing care packages to youth during finals week, in addition to Christmas and birthday gifts. Anyone can volunteer to provide services to the program, Day said, including help with care packages.

"The average population doesn't think about how meaningful care packages are to students on campus who see roommates getting them," Day said. "Many of our students say they don't even check their mailboxes because they're always empty. A care package during finals week is an important part of the normal college experience, and it makes students feel like someone cares about their success."

Although the program is in its infancy, it already is achieving positive results. A review of administrative data of students who enrolled in TIP in the fall of 2012 suggests that the program has successfully maintained 84 percent of youth through the winter 2013 term. "These results are very promising," Day said. "They are well above the average retention rates of other first-generation, low-income students who enroll at Wayne State University."

She added that WSU is embracing TIP and improving educational outcomes for kids in care as a university responsibility, not just a child welfare responsibility: "The largest percentage of kids in care are in Wayne County—nearly 50 percent of the population are there—and we are an institution located in Detroit. It's our obligation to take on this issue and take the responsibility seriously. This program was created as an institutional reaction to that need."

Special thanks to Angelique Day, M.S.W., Ph.D., Assistant Professor Wayne State University School of Social Work and TIP Project Director, for providing information for this article.

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