

Peer-to-Peer Bridge to College: Connections for Foster Youth Success

P2P



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OTL 6707 Midterm Project

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July 23, 2017

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“People don’t just participate in p2p—they believe in it. Hardware and software make it possible, but peer-to-peer technology is potent because it grows from the collective actions of large numbers of people.” -Howard Rheingold, 2002, p. 65.

Overview

It is well established that a large proportion of foster youth want to attend college. However, the stats are grim. Foster care youth have had to work through unique circumstances like moving frequently, falling behind academically, and experiencing a lack of connection to teachers and peers. These are a few examples of the challenges that foster care alumni have had to face. However, foster care youth who earn a four year degree can expect to earn \$481,000 or more in their working life compared to those who only received a high school diploma. Any college experience can increase lifetime earning to \$129,000 more on average (Peters et al, 2009). Overcoming these obstacles is important for foster care alumni to be successful in achieving a college degree (Peters et al, 2009). Unfortunately, those who are in foster care are eight times less likely to earn a college degree compared to the rest of the student population from traditional homes (Wolanin, 2005).

The mission of the Peer-to-Peer Bridge to College (P2P) community will be to improve the enrollment and retention rates of foster youth in California’s community colleges and postsecondary schools, to cultivate a sense of community in which foster youth with aspirations for a higher education are able to connect with those currently enrolled in one of California’s community colleges. The P2P community hopes to become a resource that allows for real-time connections and an online mentorship program. There are many hurdles that

foster youth face, but with online tools and capabilities, the P2P program can help make transitions smoother.

In order to employ the best practices established by Probst & Borzillo (2008), P2P aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify problems and solutions related to foster youth success in California's community college system.
2. Provide a platform for foster youth to connect to the P2P community for support.
3. Develop partnerships (stakeholders) who share the mission of the CoP, and build support and resources.
4. Explore new technologies as they relate to social media and CoP
5. Expand the CoP as the community develops.

The primary aim of the P2P online community is to inspire foster youth and foster care alumni to connect with one another for both academic and personal growth as they transition into their college years and pursue their life dreams. As an online community of practice (CoP), the main functionalities of P2P would include the development of a specialized network and system of support that would encourage unique opportunities for foster youth to engage with one another and have access to targeted resources, vision partners, and information for academic and non- academic institutions in order to successfully transition into college, career technical education, and/or career readiness programs. P2P will work alongside foster care alumni to help build bridges to their future success and achievements.

Informed by constructivist literature, foster youth can be identified as active agents who have the capacity to play a role in the development of CoPs to fit their needs. Specifically the P2P program aims to develop a community that fosters what Ito *et al* (2013) call

“interest-driven practices” that promotes “hanging out,” “messaging around,” and “geeking out.” In order to allow for the natural development of our community in a manner that is attractive to youth-users, the P2p community will provide the ability to engage in both private and public communication (Ito *et al*, 2013 p. 23). Further, the P2P Community of Practice hopes to connect professionals and volunteers in the community to assist the P2P program by offering support to transitioning foster youth.

Problem

The foster care system in the United States, while one of the most sophisticated and funded around the world, is not perfect. Each year, there are numerous foster care youth that are not adequately prepared to phase out of the system. The issues of economics, networks, and support systems are not mutually exclusive, and there is an impact on how ready a foster youth may be to enter post-secondary schooling. Some youth will find employment but may not be in positions with opportunities for advancement. Their competition for career and monetary growth could be limited by the abundance of job seekers in the entry-level field of work. Others can find themselves disillusioned by the fast and changing pace of college or post-secondary fulfillment. The end result is a low success rate among foster youth attempting to pursue career pathways.

Many studies have shown that “a majority of foster youth have college aspirations” (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, & Damashek, 2012, p.1008); however, according to Sarubbi, Parker and Sponsler (2016), “Youth who have spent time in the foster care system are among the most marginalized student populations” (p. 3). Frerer, Sosenko, and Henke (2013) find that California “foster youth are less likely than other disadvantaged youth to complete high school, enroll in community college, or remain in community college for a second year” (p. ii).

According to Gross (2016), foster youth are more likely to enroll in certificate and associate's degree programs. Additionally, community colleges can play a positive role in minimizing the college readiness gap that many foster youth face, including basic reading, writing, and mathematics competencies (Cooper, Mery, Rassen, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, California Community Colleges may benefit by employing the research that exists on this underserved population:

- 70% of foster youth between the ages of 15-19 expressed a desire to go to college, including 19% who expressed a desire to attend graduate school (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, & Damashek, 2012, p.1008).
- Fewer than 20 percent of foster youth attend college (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011, p. 2335).
- Compared to 60% of non-foster youth, “foster youth are more likely to drop out before the end of their first year (21% vs. 13%) and prior to degree completion (34% vs. 18%)” (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011, p. 2335).

While foster youth face significant hurdles on their path to educational success, their achievement gap may be minimized with the creation of an online community and the amount of financial resources that are available. Over the last decade, several government and educational institutions have developed programs to assist foster youth in attaining higher education goals.

Most of these programs focus on college affordability, in which they provide assistance above and beyond the Federal Pell, Cal Grants, and BOG Fee Waiver. For example, the federal Chafee Grant was instituted as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001. In addition, foster youth are now considered “independent” students to maximize aid

eligibility.

California foster youth also have access to EOP and EOPS financial aid programs. Scholarships aimed specifically at former foster youth such as the Orphan Foundation of America Scholarship for Youth in Foster Care provide additional financial assistance. While these financial policy shifts have helped foster youth, Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz (2009) find that “very few receive all the grants they ought to be eligible for” (p. 5).

While there are many factors that contribute to this gap, one main factor is a lack of role models and familial support. Many young adults develop a passion or lack thereof for higher education according to their parents’ attainment. “One former foster youth explained that he developed the desire to attend college after, as a child, he watched his aunt graduate: ‘She didn’t have to say anything about college... I just thought it was cool sitting in Cox Stadium at San Diego State and seeing all the people walk across the stage in their red and black’” (p. 4). Yet, foster youth are less likely to have stable and supportive familial role models. Creating a network of relatively stable peers and mentors may fill this gap through this online community.

Frerer, Sosenko, and Henke (2013) find that “Foster youth who *completed at least 15 credits in their first year of college*—one full-time semester’s worth of credits—were twice as likely as those who completed fewer credits the first year to persist to a second year”(p. 16). Therefore, a CoP that promotes achievements like these may increase foster youth academic achievement. Cohen and Kelly make a similar prescription when they advise colleges and high schools to work together to “create mentoring programs where a high school student can shadow a college student. This way, foster youth can get a sense of what college is like, and will have someone to speak to for advice and support” (p. 4). Furthermore, *The California College Pathways* (2015) has found that campus support program engagement significantly

increases foster youth retention by roughly three hundred percent (p. 9). It is, thus, imperative that foster youth are given as much help as possible when transitioning to college.

Solution

The P2P program offers a solution by creating a real-time network of online mentors and a place to gather resources. The primary goal of the program is to create the website For Your Win (FYW) to connect foster youth enrolled in postsecondary schools with other foster youth (Peer-to-Peer), including those enrolled or graduated from certificate or degree programs. The website will also include a forum and venue for networking, as well as information for resources. By connecting youth, topics can be facilitated among youth.

In addition, P2P hopes to bring innovation by celebrating the college lifestyle and healthy aspects of personal growth. This will be accomplished by linking FYW with various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and others. The site will allow participants to share their insights or experiences with foster youth through self-produced blog posts. An important goal of P2P is that foster youth participants are given a chance to showcase their college achievements so that other youth may find encouragement. Participants are asked to respond to comments and questions posed by interested visitors to the blog.

The details that describe the solutions that will be offered by the P2P Bridge to College Program are carefully planned in the time frame of this proposal (see Appendix A). The course of action will unfold in three phases beginning with the community proposal Phase I that will map out the project and identify the problems that the P2P community aims to resolve. Phase One will also include laying the foundation and building of our online community. Resources and support services will be established, blog content will be developed, and user created interaction functionality will be tested for usability. Highlighting successful foster youth who have overcome

obstacles will be our corner stone inspiration piece that will be featured on FYW. The priority is to appeal to the youth who will benefit the most from our CoP. Phase II will be a critical time of partner establishment, community development, and website expansion based on assessment and review. Phase III will be a continued process of refinement and expansion as foster youth, partners, and the overall CoP continue to grow as the efficacy of the project takes hold and becomes a solid community of identification for foster youth.

Youth in between the ages of 14-19, “are often the early adopters of mobile communications and are among the first whose identities, families, and communities begin to change” (Rheingold, 2002, p. 25). While most use social networking sites as a seamless connection to friends already established offline and do not necessarily use social media to seek out new friends, “profiles can become valuable tools for learning more about acquaintances” that can then translate into growing friendships (Ito *et al*, 2013, 89). According to Ito *et al*, “some teens- especially marginalized and ostracized ones- often relish the opportunity to find connections beyond their schools” (p. 90). Concurrently, others use social media to engage in conversations on intimate matters with strangers without facing harsh consequences to their local reputation. According to one former foster youth “when you are in foster care it is not something you share with your friends, you are just trying to make it through the next day” (Zimet, 2014). As a marginalized community, foster youth will have the opportunity to discuss and engage in these intimate conversations with peers who share similar experiences, without the potential consequences of an in-person backlash. FYW provides a place where foster youth to creates tools for this kind of interaction.

In order to facilitate social communication and reaction, platform users will be encouraged to customize online profiles. In their study of youth social media engagement Ito *et al*, find that “one of the main draws of MySpace was not just that this was the site that their friends were already using, but that the site seemed to allow a great deal more customization than other sites” (2013, p. 256). Furthermore, profile creation is a starting point for broadening media production and a transition point between hanging out, messing around, and geeking out. “As kids shared personal media such as posting videos or sharing fanfic they often connected with others in ways that encouraged them to increase production and broaden participation in communities of interest, both online and off” (Ito *et al*, 2013, p. 261). Custom group memberships and custom profiles “reflect who they think they are” (Rheingold, 2002, p. 25). What makes FYW different from social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram is that the website is solely focused on foster youth and actively encourages networking between youth and mentors as part of an online community. Further, the community will serve foster youth and those who work to improve the educational attainment of foster youth by creating an online community specific to them in which they can communicate. Peer groups are a powerful tool for learning and retention (Ito *et al*, 2013, p. 22), therefore our community will foster peer to mentor interaction. According to Ito *et al*.

Peer-to-Peer interactions [are] a space of opportunity for learning. Our cases demonstrate that some of the drivers of self-motivated learning come not from institutionalized authorities in kids’ lives setting standards and providing instruction, but from the kids observing and communicating with people engaged in the same interests and in the same struggles for status and recognition that they are (p. 22).

The P2P community will provide a safe space in which foster youth, who share an interest in

higher education, can develop a community around their shared interests and identities. Several studies have shown that “most engaged and active forms of learning with digital media happen in youth-driven settings that are focused on social communication and reaction” (Ito *et al*, 2013, p.12).

The P2P will also provide a solution to the challenge of combatting stigmas and stereotypes that many foster youth face. “My teacher called me the ‘F’ Word” one former foster youth stated at a meeting held by the RightWay foundation (Zimet, 2014). The youth then went on to explain how his teacher had outed him as a foster youth in front of his class, who had not known he was a foster child. The student broke down in tears. In order to combat the negative effects of foster stereotyping, according to Zinet “we need -as a society- to get the message out that they are not damaged” (2014). One 2017 USC graduate, Felicitas Reyes, defied the statistical odds and is proving that foster youth are not only “not-damaged” but can achieve the highest of dreams (Dodd, 2017). We hope to foster a positive expression of personal and group identity in a manner that values each individual community member and their educational achievements, similarly demolishing foster stereotypes as Reyes has. And this is where FYW can play an important role in empowerment with an approach that promotes the motto, “celebrate and motivate.” As foster youth meet and network with other youth that have succeeded in college, they will no longer have any fears of being labeled an “F.”

While several institutions have emerged to support the educational attainment of foster youth, none focus specifically on peer-to-peer connections. The *Community College Pathways for Foster Youth* program focuses on providing support and education to institutions of higher education who work with foster youth. *Foster Care to Success* provides foster youth with a

plethora of financial resources online. Others, such as the *Storyboard Project*, aim to combat stigma surrounding foster youth through a media campaign. While the work of these institutions is critical, none provide a space of resource identified and maintained by foster youth themselves for foster youth. P2P places the needs and voices of foster youth at the center of its program by providing a unique community platform in which foster youth identify the needs of the community and work collaboratively to satisfy those needs. Individual customization, social media integration, and daily opportunities for engagement will spur active community building and provide a unique experience. Using these creative communication tools, of both public and private nature, foster youth will have the opportunity to build lifelong friendships that function as bridges to their educational goals.

Online communities are more likely to “organize and govern their behavior successfully are marked by [several] design principles” (Rheingold, 2002, 35). These principles include, clearly defined group boundaries, rules narrowly tailored to group needs, member created rules and ability to alter rules, “a graduated system of sanctions”, and conflict resolution mechanisms (Rheingold, 2002, p. 35-36). Furthermore, one main reason for failure in communities of practice is a lack of a core group of members (Probst & Borzillo, 2008, p. 343). Therefore, we aim to launch our platform with a core group of 20 members that who have actively participated in the development of the platform. One study conducted by the Office of Educational Technology found that communities with “managers” increased community participation and member inclusion (2014, p. 18). Our core group of 20 members will function as community “managers” after the initial launch in phase one.

The intended final results of the online community are two-fold. First, it fosters a sense of community and creates a bridge between foster youth interested in attending college in

California and those already enrolled. And second, it creates an online network of students, institutional support services, and external support services. Both of these aims will increase foster youth enrollment, retention, and degree completion in California's community colleges. In addition, P2P creates a place in which foster youth can connect with other youth, especially those that have successfully transitioned out of the foster care system. There are many foster care alumni that are left without a network and are often unable to find the resources needed. In many ways, this online community is meant to prevent homelessness among foster youth aging out of the system by providing a sense of belonging, purpose, and community.

While it is acknowledged that a digital-divide exists between youth participants in which not all have equal access to the internet and technology (Quan-Haase and boyd, 2011), Quan- Hasse and boyd find that “even if the ‘digital divide’ is closing, a new ‘participation gap’ has emerged, rendering some teens invisible in the contemporary mediated landscape” (2011). Extensive connections between foster youth programs and institutions across the state will be established in order to reach this community and bridge the gap between in person networks and the online community of practice.

According to Ito *et al* (2013) “negotiations among kids, parents, educators, and technologists over the shape of youth online participation is also a site of struggle over what counts as legitimate forms of learning and literacy” (p. 23). To measure the success of our community we define success both qualitatively and quantitatively. Ethnographic and empirical data will be collected to both analyze the rate of college acceptance and retention as well as users' responses to the platform. Specifically, we will aim to measure feelings of community and engagement with others as a result of platform use.

Appendix A

Timeframe

The P2P community platform will be developed and launched in three main phases.

Phase I

- Begin building a framework for the P2P community with an initial group of twenty foster youth (ten current students and ten prospective students).
- Launch the pilot for the P2P community web page with P2P participants (foster alumni).
- Conclude with an analysis of community success through a pre-post survey analysis that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data.

Phase II

- Evaluate and interpret findings of the post-phase one survey.
- Aim to grow to thirty additional foster youth members and expand to include community professionals to partner with the program.
- Platform development will incorporate a private functionality.
- Additional partners will provide increased opportunities for success including internships and job placement opportunities to community members.

Phase III

- Expand the community network to organizations and individuals outside of the state.
- Seek partnerships or involvement with national foster care initiatives.
- Further refinement of objectives in response to Phase I and Phase II reviews.

Phases		Deliverable
Phase I: Building Community Peer- to-Peer Bridge California Focus	Community Proposal	Complete a community proposal that outlines the project and identifies the problems our community aims to resolve.
	Content Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collection of authentic foster youth stories · Assemble database of support services available <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Preparing for college <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (Coursera and other MOOCs courses etc.) ◆ Application assistance ◆ Paying for college ◆ Your first day/week/month · Develop blog content

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Goal to have content 90 potential blog posts (1 day x 3 months) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Funny foster specific comics ● Foster youth Documentaries ● College specific documentaries ● College readiness information ● Foster Story Highlights ● Did you know stats · User Created Content Functionality/Interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Instagram, Facebook, social media ◆ Scholarships ◆ App - Foster Connection · Develop pre and post engagement survey · Compile list of foster youth to invite · Identify launch community members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Goal of 20 foster youth
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	Website Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Branding & homepage development · Develop community guidelines/rules for users · Initial blogroll · Incorporate resources database · Import initial members and encourage creative profile creation
	Project Launch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Begin promoting launch through social media #BridgetoCollege #MyStory #FosterCollegeSuccess #FosterCare #PathwaystoSuccess #P2P · Send out massive invitation to join list · Contact local news stations for coverage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Contact College newspapers ◆ Promote on college social media sites
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Local cable and broadcast outlets #abc7eyewitness ◆ Radio outlets (Sirius) ◆ Podcasts
	Post-Launch Community Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 3 Month post-join survey conducted · Metrics assessed in program review · Review findings incorporated into partnership proposals · Promote findings on social media
Phase II: Bridge to Work Foster to Professional Bridge California Focus	Partnership Establishment (Appendix B)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identify list of potential partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ask current members for recommendations ◆ Identify potential partners through research · Draft partnership proposals letters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Include proposal overview ◆ Include mockups of site · Send partnership proposals out & follow up after 1 week

	Community Expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Announce expansion of community to existing members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Expand community of foster youth to 50 · Invite partners to join community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Goal of 10 local and state level partners?
	Website Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Incorporate list of community partners on platform · Incorporate private/public functionality
	Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Surveys
Phase III: Expanding to wider community of	Partnership Establishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Recruit non-foster mentors · Peer-to-Peer

volunteers Foster to Network Bridge USA Focus	Website Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Build interactive national partner map → Develop a News & Events page → Open Discussion
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Timeline

Phase I	August 27, 2017
Phase II	December 2, 2017
Phase III	March 3, 2018

Appendix B

Potential Partners

- Independent Living Program (ILP) and Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP)
- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office
 - Foster and Kinship Care Education
 - Foster Youth Success Initiative
- Extended Opportunities Programs and Services
- District and College level foster youth liaisons
- The Independent Living Skills Program
 - <https://www.alamedacountyilp.org/>
- Foster Care to Success
 - <http://www.fc2success.org/our-programs/>
- Community College Pathways
 - <http://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ctl/ArticleView/mid/1686/articleId/161/Serving-Foster-Youth-in-California-Community-Colleges>
- Promise Scholars Program
 - <http://www.turlockjournal.com/archives/11001/>
- Northern California University Foster Youth Consortium
 - <http://www.fostercoalition.com/help-foster-children>
- The Storyboard Project
 - <http://thestoryboardproject.com/#!/home>
- Just in Time for Foster Youth
 - <https://www.instagram.com/jitfosteryouth/>
 - Jitfosteryouth.org

Content Database

- Where to go?
 - Finding the right program
 - Finding the right school
 - Online or in person
 - C'reer App
 - Mynextmove.org
- The Application Process
- Financial Aid & Monetary Resources
 - FAFSA, Scholarships, Go Fund Me
 - Tuition, books, fees, housing
 - BOG
 - Cal Grants, Pell Grant
 - College Readiness

- Relevant Free Coursera Courses:
 - Learning how to learn <https://www.coursera.org/learn/learning-how-to-learn>
 - Grammar and punctuation <https://www.coursera.org/learn/grammar-punctuation>
 - Creative problem solving <https://www.coursera.org/learn/creative-problem-solving>
 - Financial planning for young adults <https://www.coursera.org/learn/financial-planning>
 - Getting started with essay writing <https://www.coursera.org/learn/getting-started-with-essay-writing>
 - Positive psychology: Resilience skills <https://www.coursera.org/learn/positive-psychology-resilience>
 - Academic listening and notetaking: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/note-taking>
 - Conflict resolution skills <https://www.coursera.org/learn/conflict-resolution-skills>
 - Introduction to research for essay writing <https://www.coursera.org/learn/introduction-to-research-for-essay-writing>
 - How to write a resume: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/how-to-write-a-resume>
 - Explore careers, colleges, personality profile testing, job outlook <https://www.mynextmove.org>
- Academic support services
- Social activities / meetups
- Mentor connections
- Relevant online documentaries:
 - The Foster Home From Hell <http://documentaryheaven.com/foster-home-from-hell/>

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