THE ACADEMY
A Program for Older Youth Transitioning
Out of Foster Care

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Executive Summary

Children who "age out" of foster care—who reach adulthood without returning to their birth families or being adopted—have high rates of homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and other adverse circumstances as adults. In 2007, the Heckscher Foundation for Children collaborated with New York City's Administration for Children's Services, several foster care agencies, and two youth service providers—F.E.G.S Health & Human Services System (F.E.G.S) and The Door—to create a program to help these youth. That program, the Academy, includes innovative features such as individually tailored service plans for education, training, and employment; social and recreational opportunities; and open eligibility and participation policies. The Heckscher Foundation asked the Vera Institute of Justice to study the Academy's implementation during its first two years (2007-2008).

Vera researchers found that the Academy helped fill a gap in the city's youth and young adult services programming. For example, flexible funding allowed the Academy to develop new programming, such as sheltered internships and low-literacy level GED preparation courses integrated with paid internship placements, easing the conflict many foster youth face in choosing between education and training or work. Researchers also found strong support for the program among people in the field, who believed the Academy engaged youth who do not access traditional services. They attributed this, in part, to the program's "easy to get in, impossible to be kicked out" philosophy, its two locations staffed by specially trained adults, and its independence from the foster care system—with which many youth have an ambivalent relationship.

Researchers also identified several challenges for the Academy, including difficulties in coordinating services and information and in managing inter-organizational relationships. These challenges were intensified by the program's two service providers' diverse locations, cultures, and areas of expertise.

Moving forward, the authors recommend maintaining the program's three key features: a flexible intake policy that is responsive to the real-life circumstances and needs of these youth; integration of education, employment, and support services under one roof; and the provision of these services by people who are independent from the child welfare system. To strengthen the program, they recommend structural changes in the program design to expand possible funding sources. Specifically, the Academy should consider marketing and contracting in-care and post-care services separately. This will allow it to access funding sources that specifically target foster care youth or youth living independently. Also, the Academy should further develop its approach to systematically measuring and analyzing outcomes relative to individual clients' baseline at entry into the program. Capturing clients' initial service plans in a form that can be readily analyzed, for example, would increase the program's ability to report client outcomes while maintaining its emphasis on individualized, incremental outcome measures. The Academy might also consider giving youth financial incentives for participation. These incentives should be tied to achieving benchmarks in their service plan.

Given the program's promising early performance and the unmet need among foster children who age out in New York City, the authors provide recommendations for expanding the program beyond its current single provider.* Operating the program with multiple providers calls for additional investment in information technology and establishing a program headquarters. Prior to undertaking such expansion, however, a rigorous outcome evaluation ought to be conducted to determine the program's long-term impact.

* In 2009, after the completion of this study, the Academy was consolidated under a single provider, F·E·G·S, at a single location. According to Heckscher Foundation officials, the decision to continue operating the program only at F·E·G·S was determined by the number of youth served at each site and the providers' willingness to communicate and engage with the program design process. For a report on the Academy's progress after this transition, see The Academy: F·E·G·S 2009 Update at www.fegs.org/academy. Also, some of the recommendations listed in this report may have subsequently been implemented by the program.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

When the child welfare system removes children from their homes, it becomes responsible for providing them with housing, quality education, and other services to ensure their well-being. As these children age, it is also responsible for preparing them for adulthood and independence. Since foster care agencies have no funding or mandate to follow up with youth after discharge, however, there is often no continuity between in-care and post-care services. This problem is intensified by the tendency of youth to underestimate their future needs while still within the safety net of the child welfare system. Also, many services address only one area of need and are offered in diverse locations, with attendant problems in service coordination and convenience of access. Finally, with funding often tied to standardized long-term outcomes, programs have a strong incentive to focus their services on high-performing young people who are likely to meet these goals, excluding many youth in need.

Many older youth in foster care have spent most of their childhood in the child welfare system and have experienced several foster care placements, with changes in residential location, schools, and social connections. Older youth who reach adulthood without returning to their birth families or being adopted—who "age out" of foster care—often leave the system with few skills and a limited support network.[1] They may lack basic reading and math skills, for example, and many do not complete postsecondary education. Without these skills, many struggle to find employment, secure housing, or access other opportunities for success. Research shows that youth who age out of foster care have high rates of homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration.[2] Many of these outcomes are interrelated, present cumulative challenges, and come with steep social costs.

In 2007, the Heckscher Foundation for Children created the Academy, a program aimed at improving the outcomes of older youth transitioning out of the New York City foster care system. The program includes many innovative features that respond to the structural problems of serving aging-out youth. These features include individually tailored service plans focused on education, training, and employment as well as social and recreational opportunities that are

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[1] For the purpose of this report, youth who age out refers to all foster care youth who leave foster care without permanency—being adopted, placed in the guardianship of a family member, or formally reunited with their families. This includes young people whose foster care track closes when they are absent without leave (AWOL) and those who are discharged to military service, as well as youth who are discharged to their own responsibility. This group is heterogeneous in the varying levels of informal support they receive from family members, friends, and mentors. Without a legal guardian upon discharge, however, all must be prepared to live independently.

[2] P.J. Pecora et al. "Educational and Employment Outcomes of Adults Formerly Placed in Foster Care: Results from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study," *Children and Youth Services Review* 28 (2006): 1459-1481.; M.E. Courtney, A. Dworsky, G.R. Cusick, J. Havlicek, A. Perez, and T. Keller, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21* (Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2008).; J.M. Park, S. Metraux, G. Broadbar, and D.P. Culhane, "Public Shelter Admission Among Young Adults with Child Welfare Histories by Type of Service and Type of Exit," *Departmental Papers (SPP)* (2004). Available at: http://works.bepress.com/dennis_culhane/20.; B. Kerman, J. Wildfire, and R. Barth, "Outcomes for Young Adults Who Experienced Foster Care," *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24 no. 5 (2002): 319-344.
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coordinated by a personal advisor and offered under one roof. The program also creates partnerships between foster care agencies and community service providers to serve as a bridge between in-care and post-care services and has open eligibility and participation policies designed to meet the particular needs of youth in foster care. The Academy was developed in close collaboration with the Administration for Children's Services (Children's Services)—New York City's child welfare agency—two youth service providers—F˙E˙G˙S Health & Human Services System (F˙E˙G˙S) and The Door, and several foster care agencies—Jewish Child Care Association, SCO Family of Services, Good Shepherd Services, Children's Village, and Safe Space.[3] During its first two years of operation, from 2007 to 2008, the Academy operated as a partnership between F˙E˙G˙S and The Door, both of which have long records of experience and expertise working with troubled youth. [4]

To assess the Academy's implementation, the Heckscher Foundation asked the Vera Institute of Justice to conduct a process evaluation of the program. Vera's evaluation focused on the development process, the program's key features, and how program services were coordinated among program partners. This report discusses the results of Vera's evaluation.

The report begins with background information about the characteristics and post-care outcomes of youth aging out of foster care and the policy response to these outcomes on the federal, state, and local level. It next describes Vera's methodology for conducting the program evaluation. The report then discusses the process of the Academy's design, the program's key features, and the challenges program partners encountered during the implementation process. The report concludes with Vera's recommendations for the program going forward.

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[3] As of 2007, Safe Space is no longer a foster care agency.

[4] Established as nonprofit organization in 1972, The Door serves over 8,000 young persons ages 12 to 21 annually. The Door offers a wide range of services including career development, GED and ELS classes, health care, legal services, arts, sports, and recreational activities. F·E·G·S (Federation Employment and Guidance Service, Inc.(d/b/a F·E·G·S Health & Human Services System was established in 1934. F·E·G·S is a broad-based health and human service delivery system, providing innovative programs in the areas of: Education and Youth Services; Employment, Career and Workforce Development; Welfare to Work Services; Behavioral Health Services; Developmental Disabilities; Rehabilitation; Residential & Housing Services; Family Services; and Home Care. Today, with an operating budget of $265 million, the F·E·G·S health and human services network reaches more than 100,000 individuals and families each year at over 350 facilities, residences and offsite program locations throughout New York City and Long Island. F·E·G·S's programs help individuals with mental, developmental and physical disabilities, as well as youth, the unemployed and underemployed, immigrants, families, and others.

Background

Youth characteristics and outcomes

Most foster care youth approach adulthood with significant educational and workforce skill deficits and a weak social and financial support system. They have lower high school graduation rates than their non-foster care peers and are less likely to obtain a GED diploma.[5] Some, particularly youth in congregate care, lack even basic reading and math skills.[6] Only a small fraction ever complete post-secondary education.[7] Although many youth aging out of foster care are discharged with some form of part-time work experience, they have significantly higher unemployment rates than youth in the general population or youth who have achieved permanency before discharge—youth who are adopted, reunited with their families, or placed in the care of another legal guardian.[8] When employed, these youth tend to have lower incomes than youth who achieve permanency or peers who have not been in foster care.[9]

Whereas half of young adults in the general population between the ages of 18 and 24 continue to live with their parents and rely on them for material assistance during the transition to adulthood, foster care youth aging out of the system usually do not have this option.[10] With higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, and a lack of family resources, former foster care youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population.[11] Despite the efforts of child welfare workers, older youth who spent time in the child welfare system often rely on homeless shelters immediately following their discharge from care.[12] These youth also tend to have mental and behavioral health issues and become involved in the criminal justice system.[13]

The personal challenges faced by these youth come with steep social costs. Homeless shelter use, correctional placements, emergency health services, and draw-downs on social services are costly and strain government systems already operating beyond capacity. For example, it costs New York City taxpayers more than $40,000 per year in shelter, social, and health services to

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[5] See, for example, Courtney et al., 2008.

[6] W.W. Blome, "What Happens to Foster Kids: Educational Experiences of a Random Sample of Foster Care Youth and a Matched Group of Non-Foster Care Youth," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 14 no. 1 (1997): 41-53.

[7] P.J. Pecora, R.C. Kessler, J. Williams, K. O'Brien, A.C. Downs, D. English, J. White, E. Hiripi, C.R. White, T. Wiggins, and K. Holmes, *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study,* (Seattle: Casey Family Programs, 2001).

[8] Kerman and Wildfire, 2002; Pecora et al., 2006.

[9] R.M. George, L. Bilaver, and B.J. Lee, *Employment Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care,* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2002 http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/fostercare-agingout02/.; Courtney et al., 2008.

[10] J. Fields, *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2003,* Current Population Reports, P20-553, (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

[11] See, for example, Park et al., (2004).

[12] Juvenile Law Center, *Fostering Connections After Age 18: Report of a Convening to Address Housing, Health Care, Education and Other Transition to Adulthood Issues*, (Philadelphia: Juvenile Law Center, 2008).; Park et al., (2004).

[13] Pecora et al., 2006; Courtney et al., 2008.

care for a homeless person with mental health problems. The cost of a jail bed is about $27,000 a year, and prison stays are even more expensive. Other personal adversities, such as loss of future productivity, are harder to quantify but nonetheless exact costs.[14]

Though foster care should be a temporary stop on the path to a permanent and safe home, the number of youth who stayed until they became adults increased by 41 percent between 1998 and 2005, when more than 24,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States.[15] Although the number of New York City children in foster care has decreased markedly since it peaked in 1992, more children in foster care are older. In 2006, just before the start of the Academy, 1,247 youth aged out of the New York City foster care system, accounting for about 20 percent of all foster care discharges (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Youth aging out of New York City foster care, 1995-2006

Youth aging out of NYC foster care as percent of total foster care discharges, 1995 − 2006		
Year	Aged-out youth	% of foster care discharges
2006	1,247	20.5
2005	1,168	17.5
2004	1,329	17.3
2003	1,448	15.7
2002	1,499	15.1
2001	1,315	13.1
2000	1,462	13.3
1995	1,770	16.1

Source: Authors' calculations, Children's Services' database (CCRS). The authors define "aged-out youth" to include all youth who leave foster care without permanency, including youth whose foster care track closes when they are absent without leave (AWOL) and those who are discharged to military service, as well as youth who are discharged to their own responsibility.

Analysis of Children's Services' administrative database, the Child Care Review Service (CCRS), reveals that many of these youth had spent a significant portion of their childhood in the

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[14] Culhane, Dennis P., Stephen Metraux, and Trevor Hadley, "Public Service Reductions Associated with Placement of Homeless Persons with Severe Mental Illness in Supportive Housing," *Housing Policy Debates* 13 no. 1 (2002): 107-163; Lewin Group, *Costs of Serving Homeless Individuals in Nine Cities,* Report for The Corporation for Supportive Housing, (Falls Church, VA: The Lewin Group, 2004). Available at http://www.rwjf.org/files/newsroom/cshLewinPdf.pdf (Accessed: May 13 2009); Thomas Packard, Melanie Delgado, Robert Fellmeth, and Karen McCready, "A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Transitional Services for Emancipating Foster Youth," *Children and Youth Services Review* 30 no. 11 (2008): 1267-1278.
[15] Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, "Time for Reform: Aging Out and On Their Own." May 2007.
http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Foster_care_reform/Kids_are_Waiting_Timefor Reform0307.pdf.

child welfare system. Most entered foster care as young children or as early adolescents (see figure 2), with entrances mostly due to abuse and/or neglect (see figure 3). Almost half of these youth had spent more than eight years in the foster care system. In 2006, most youth who aged out of foster care in New York City had experienced many changes in foster care placement, resulting in changes in residence, schools, and social networks. Almost one-fourth had experienced seven or more changes in placement (see figure 4).

Figure 2: Age of first entry to foster care of youth who aged out in 2006

Age	Youth	% Youth[*]
5 or younger	351	28.1
6 to 10	229	18.4
11 to 15	477	38.3
16 or older	190	15.2
Total	1,247	100

*Figures have been rounded.
Source: Authors' calculations, Children's Services' database (CCRS). For 50 children the date of first entry to foster care was missing. In these cases the age of first entry was estimated based on the date of first movement available in the CCRS database.

Figure 3: Reasons for initial entry to foster care of youth who aged out in 2006

Reason for entry to care	Youth	% Youth[*]
Abuse/neglect	818	65.6
Voluntary surrender	247	19.8
PINS	113	9.1
Unable to determine	69	5.5
Total	1,247	100

*Figures have been rounded.
Source: Authors' calculations, Children's Services' database (CCRS).

Figure 4: Number of unique foster care placements of youth who aged out in 2006

Number of Placements	Youth	% Youth[*]
1 or 2	303	24.3
3 or 4	361	28.9
5 to 6	256	20.5
7 or more	327	26.2
Total	1,247	100

*Figures have been rounded.
Source: Authors' calculations, Children's Services' database (CCRS)

Policy response and the New York City context

Concerns about the adverse post-care outcomes of older youth transitioning out of the foster care system have motivated federal, state, and local policy changes and legislation. In the past 25 years the Social Security Act, which provides the federal framework for the operation of state child welfare agencies, was amended three times to better serve aging-out youth. Until recently, these changes had focused primarily on increasing the federal funding available to states for independent living services, such as educational and employment services and training in life skills, and increasing states' flexibility in using these funds.[16] The 2008 Fostering Connections Act encourages a new strategy: providing funding to support states that decide to provide foster care and to develop age-appropriate services to older youth until the age of 21. This act uses the same formulas for federal reimbursement for older youth as for youth under 18 years of age and provides $15 million a year in discretionary grant funds for building the connections youth need as they transition to adulthood.[17]

Observers of child welfare agencies have often described the child welfare system's strategies regarding youth's transition to adulthood as a sink-or-swim approach.[18] Even before the 2008 Fostering Connections Act was passed, New York, like many states, acknowledged that most youth are not prepared to live independently when they turn 18 years of age, even under the best of circumstances, and officials extended access to the state's foster care services to youth over 18 years old.[19] However, since child welfare agencies have neither the mandate nor funding to provide services to youth after they leave foster care, the regulations are based on a service model that concentrates on independent living services provided before youth leave the system.

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[16] In 1985 the Independent Living Initiative gave states flexibility in using federal funds for providing older youth (ages 16 to 21) with independent living services. In 1999, to strengthen the Independent Living Initiative, Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act (Chafee Act), which doubled the federal funds available for independent living services and increased the states' flexibility to use these funds. One provision of the act, for example, allows states to use up to 30 percent of the federal funds for room and board for youth 18 to 21 who have left care. Although these policies provide states with additional federal funds for supporting the needs of older youth in their care, they do not allow for federal reimbursement of the high costs of foster care administration. In many jurisdictions older youth still do not receive all the services called for by these laws.

[17] This includes allowing states to expand subsidized adoption and guardianship programs for older youth. It also requires child welfare agencies to develop a specific and individualized transition plan for each of their clients over 18 years of age, which includes identifying and connecting them with local opportunities for post-care support. For more information, see www.fosteringconnections.org, the site of a national resource center dedicated to facilitating implementation of the act.

[18] Richard A. Settersten, "Social Policy and the Transition to Adulthood," in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy,* edited by R. Settersten, Jr., F. Furstenberg, Jr., and R. Rumbaut (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[19] Extension after the 18th birthday is often conditioned on high school attendance, participation in education programs, or documentation of special needs. For state-specific policies regarding older youth in foster care, see www.childwelfarepolicy.org or Adrienne L. Fernandes, *Youth Transitioning From Foster Care: Background, Federal Programs, and Issues for Congress,* CRC Report for Congress RL34499 (Congressional Research Service, 2008), Appendix B.

In New York State, additional regulations and policies are set by local child welfare agencies.[20] In New York City, Children's Services partners with private, nonprofit foster care agencies, often referred to as "contract agencies" or "voluntary agencies," to provide foster care.[21] Children's Services formulates the policies and guidelines for these agencies and monitors their compliance. For example, Children's Services sets the minimum standards of services that should be provided to older youth in care to support their transition to independent living. In a 2006 plan, *Preparing Youth for Adulthood*, Children's Services acknowledged the importance of connecting older youth with community resources and "ensuring that ongoing supports are in place when a young adult does age-out of care so that every young adult has a network of supports throughout their transition to adulthood," while still emphasizing in-care services.[22] This stance synthesizes a focus on nurturing long-term connections with a traditional independence-oriented approach.

Despite significant regulatory reform, funding issues and structural challenges have so far prevented the plan from being translated into concrete changes in service delivery. Most foster contract agencies still provide independent living training for older youth in house and in classroom settings, a format which many believe (and a small number of well-controlled studies conducted in other jurisdictions have found) to be ineffective.[23] While some service providers perceive these services as helpful in preparing youth for independence, foster care youth tend to view these trainings as inadequate.[24] A study conducted in the Midwest found that many former foster youth who have undergone such training still feel ill-prepared to live on their own, secure housing, or obtain a job.[25]

This brief discussion of the institutional structure and policy framework of the New York City foster care system and the characteristics of youth who age out of the system provides the context in which the Academy program was developed. It also provides a glimpse into the

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[20] New York State is one of the few states that operate a state-supervised rather than a state-administered child welfare system. In a state-supervised system the state's social service agency sets general policy guidelines and regulations for the local child welfare agencies. Additional policies and regulations are often set by the local agencies which are led by commissioners who report to locally elected leaders (mayors or county executives). The current New York State regulations require foster care agencies to provide youth who have a goal of independent living with at least two days (16 hours) of independent living skills training in a one-year period. Such trainings "include formalized instruction, including supervised performance in job search, career counseling, apartment finding, budgeting, shopping, cooking, and house cleaning." (New York Codes, Rules, and Regulations, Title 18, Ch. II, Articles 2-3).

[21] Children's Services conducts child protective investigations, files petitions in the family court, and provides family support services aimed at keeping children safe. Children removed from their parents are usually placed in foster homes that are recruited and monitored by the private contract agencies.

[22] New York City Administration for Children's Services, *Preparing Youth for Adulthood* (2006). Available at http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/youth_for_adulthood.pdf.

[23] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Evaluation of the Life Skills Training Program: Los Angeles County,* (Washington, DC, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008), pg. vi.

[24] M. Freundlich and R.J. Avery, "Transitioning from Congregate Care: Preparation and Outcomes," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. 15 (2006): 507-518.

[25] Mark A. Courtney, Irving Piliavin, Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, and Ande Lesmith, "Foster Youth Transition to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care," *Child Welfare* 80 no. 6 (2001).

challenges the Academy and its agency partners face in serving this population. In that vein, it bears noting that like all professionals committed to improving outcomes for foster care youth, the Academy operates in a field that is under-resourced. Like the challenges foster care professionals aim to address, the personal and professional stresses of the work are considerable.

Methodology

Vera's study of the Academy program's implementation began in 2007 and focused on the first two years of the program (2007-2008). Researchers examined the program's design and organizational structure, as well as issues related to coordinating services with two service providers and communicating with these providers and referring agencies. The findings presented in this report are based on the following:

Direct observation

Vera researchers observed the Academy programming at the two service sites (F.E.G.S and The Door), attended all meetings of the Academy's steering committee, and engaged in regular informal communication with those directing the Academy program.[26]

Surveys

Vera designed and conducted two Web-based surveys aimed at understanding coordination and implementation issues. The first survey was developed as a log-book that would provide a tool for the Academy directors to document and reflect on their experiences implementing the program. It paid special attention to issues related to communicating with the agencies that referred youth to the Academy and how implementation issues were resolved.

The second survey was administered to the Academy staff members and to relevant staff at the five referring agencies and the Heckscher Foundation. This survey was adapted from the Interagency Collaboration Assessment Tool developed by Van de Ven and Ferry (1980).[27] Vera used the survey to focus attention on measuring interagency processes, such as how information is exchanged, collaborative activities, and perceived satisfaction with relationships and productivity. Steering committee members provided Vera with the contact information of their staff who were directly involved with the Academy program. Direct involvement was defined as anyone who referred clients to the Academy program, had direct contact with Academy staff, or was employed as an Academy staff member.

The second survey was anonymous and was sent to 113 individuals. Three reminders were sent to individuals who did not initially respond to the survey invitation. Individuals responded to the survey between May and July 2008, approximately one and a half years after the start of the program. Forty-one responses were received (a 36 percent response rate) from the following partner agencies: Good Shepherd Services, 12 (29 percent of all responses); Children's Village, 10 (24 percent), and F.E.G.S, 9 (22 percent) accounted for the majority of respondents. SCO Family of Services made up 12 percent of the sample, the Jewish Child Care Association, 2

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[26] The steering committee was staffed by representatives from the five referring agencies and the Heckscher Foundation, the Academy site directors, and representatives of other program partners (such as Vera). It met quarterly to discuss development of services, to troubleshoot, and to coordinate client services.

[27] The Interagency Collaboration Assessment Tool is a validated tool used to assess collaborative relationships between organizations on a range of constructs, such as environmental factors, situational factors, task characteristics, interagency processes, and outcomes.

percent, and Safe Space accounted for 10 percent. No staff members from The Door participated in the survey.

Interviews

Vera conducted 23 face-to-face interviews with Academy stakeholders. Stakeholders interviewed represented every organization involved in the Academy's design and implementation and included stakeholders at many levels of responsibility and authority. Vera developed a semi-structured interview instrument for each category of respondent. Five instruments were developed, one each for Academy directors, steering committee members, referring agency caseworkers, Academy advisors, and representatives of the Heckscher Foundation. Interviews focused on comparing the Academy to other available programs and services, the characteristics of the youth referred to the Academy, and identifying the most and least useful Academy programming. Interviewers also asked stakeholders about their experiences with the Academy focusing on the level, type, and usefulness of communication and coordination among the various Academy partners. Finally, interviewers asked stakeholders about their opinions on the role of the Heckscher Foundation in the development and implementation of the Academy. Interviews were conducted under legal agreements of confidentiality. Vera agreed to use information from interviews in a way that would conceal the identity of the stakeholder and that person's organizational affiliation. Quotes used throughout this report will identify stakeholders' titles (e.g., agency caseworker) but not the organization at which they hold that title.

Findings: The Development of the Academy Program

> *The Academy has the players around the table to build something that should really be able to represent the depth and scope of what a young person needs to make a successful transition to adulthood.*
>
> —Academy program director

The Academy's design was the result of a process initiated by the Heckscher Foundation in 2005. While most funders of social programs require their service providers to adhere to a pre-determined program structure that includes defined program start and end points, a set menu of services, and key outcome measures, the Heckscher Foundation took a collaborative and a non-prescriptive approach for developing the Academy. It made a strategic decision to design the program in partnership with foster care agencies, building on their expertise with older foster care youth and leveraging their contacts with potential program clients. (A visual representation of this process, along with funding details not presented in the text of this section, is available in Appendix A.)

The foundation invited five foster care agencies—SCO Family of Services, The Children's Village, Safe Space, Jewish Child Care Association, and Good Shepherd Services—to collaboratively design a program for older youth.[28] In addition to their reputations and track records as high quality agencies, these five agencies were selected because they had a critical mass of older youth in their care and expressed a desire to step beyond their existing services to improve client outcomes.[29] Over a six month period, representatives from the Heckscher Foundation and the agencies' executive directors met each month to discuss the challenges facing older youth in care and brainstorm the Academy's potential role in mitigating these challenges. This group formed the basis of the Academy steering committee, which would later be joined by representatives from the service providers and other program partners.

The steering committee decided to position the Academy program outside the child welfare system in order to serve as a bridge between in-care and post-care services. Community-based providers outside of the child welfare system would provide Academy services, but the Academy would be dependent on the capacity, cooperation, and "buy-in" of the referring foster care agencies. In order to improve and enhance the internal capacities of the referring agencies to work with older youth, the Heckscher Foundation provided the agencies with technical assistance, including access to training services provided by Workforce Professionals Training Institute, which focused on youth employment issues. In addition, the foundation provided the agencies with development grants to refine their in-house services for youth and to compensate the agencies for resources spent working with the Academy.

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[28] Safe Space is no longer a foster care agency as of 2007.

[29] In 2005, these agencies received scores of "excellent" and "very good" on the quality of their their foster boarding home programs as assessed by the "EQUIP" rating system employed by the Administration for Children's Services. See "ACS 2005 EQUIP Scores Show Continued FBH Improvement," *New York Nonprofit Press,* October 2006, vol. 5 no. 9. Available at http://www.nynp.biz/current/archives/nynparchives/1006_October_2006_Edition.pdf.

The steering committee was also charged with selecting a service provider to operate the Academy. After the foundation reviewed several providers, two were invited to compete for the Academy contract: The Door, located in lower Manhattan, and F·E·G·S, which (among other programs) operates a youth center located in the South Bronx. After their presentations before the steering committee, the two providers returned to the committee with a proposal to jointly operate the Academy program. According to interviews, although the initial plan was to pilot the program with a single provider, the opportunities presented by the combined efforts of two highly qualified providers with different strengths and histories led the steering committee to follow a multiple provider model.

The joint proposal crafted by F·E·G·S and The Door served as a rough blueprint for the new program, with a plan to figure out details—such as intake processes, the provision of additional services, and the format and content of program data collection and reporting—as the program developed. This looseness was motivated by a desire to not delay services to youth in need and by the innovative nature of a program design for which no established best practices or guidelines existed. To assist the program providers in figuring out these details and to further support the development of the program and troubleshoot challenges, the Heckscher Foundation hired a consultant with expertise in workforce development.

After the initial planning phase, the Academy steering committee met quarterly to discuss issues such as the referral of youth, sharing client information between the Academy and the referring agencies, and the development and delivery of Academy services. By serving as a forum where implementation issues could be discussed and best practices shared, the steering committee also facilitated the formation of working relationships among the agencies and community providers and emphasized the agencies' and providers' joint ownership of the program.

This report focuses on the first two years of the program, when services were provided by both F·E·G·S and The Door.[30] Based on data provided to Vera, during this two-year period the five participating agencies referred 327 young persons to the program. Fifty-eight percent were referred to F·E·G·S, and 42 percent were referred to The Door.[31] After intake, referred youth become members of the Academy and can participate in educational, employment, and recreational programs while they are in foster care and after discharge. Academy staff assign an advisor to each youth to develop an individualized service plan, ensure service delivery, monitor progress, and communicate progress and concerns to agency staff. The advisor meets with the youth during the intake process to review available program services, give a tour of the program sites, and assess service needs. For youth who are interested in educational programming, the intake process also includes a Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to determine the youth's reading and math skills. Following this process, the young person and his or her agency caseworker are invited to discuss the service plan and goals with the Academy advisor.

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[30] In January 2009, F·E·G·S became the single service provider for the Academy program.
[31] Data reported by the Academy program from January 2007 through June 2008.

About 46 percent of Academy youth participated in employment services, and almost 30 percent participated in both education and employment services. Both The Door and F·E·G·S offered core program services, which included pre-GED and GED preparation courses, small group tutoring, career development/job readiness programs, and internships. Other services, such as mental health counseling and legal services, were offered based on each provider's capacity.

The program structure is depicted in figure 5, below. The program structure and features are summarized in figure 6.

Figure 5: The structure of the Academy program

Community service providers

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                              ┌────────┐        ┌──────────┐
                              │ F·E·G·S│◄──────►│ The Door │
                              └────────┘        └──────────┘
┌──────────────┐
│  Heckscher   │
│  Foundation  │
└──────────────┘
   ┌───────┐ ┌───────┐ ┌───────────┐ ┌──────────┐ ┌────────┐
   │  SCO  │ │ JCCA  │ │ Children's│ │   Good   │ │  Safe  │
   │       │ │       │ │  Village  │ │ Shepherd │ │ Space* │
   └───────┘ └───────┘ └───────────┘ └──────────┘ └────────┘
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Foster care agencies

*Safe Space is no longer a foster care agency as of 2007

Figure 6: Academy program structure and features

Program Structure	
Funding	Funding provided by the Heckscher Foundation for Children including funding to the Academy sites and development grants and technical assistance to the referring agencies.
Service providers	During the first two years of the program, two service providers operated the Academy program—The Door (Manhattan) and F·E·G·S (Bronx). As of January 1, 2009, the Academy is operated solely by F·E·G·S.
Participating foster care agencies	Five foster care agencies—SCO, Children's Village, JCCA, Good Shepard and Safe Space refer youth to the Academy (Safe Space is not a foster care agency as of 2007).
Liaisons	Liaisons at the referring agencies handle the referrals to the Academy program and serve as points of contact for follow-up on client issues.
Academy advisors	Consistent with a primary person model, each Academy client is assigned an Academy advisor, who serves as a point of contact. Advisors develop service plans with Academy members, follow up with the young people to ensure service delivery, and are responsible for communication with the referring agencies in regard to the assigned young persons.
Academy Steering Committee	A Steering Committee staffed by representatives from the five referring agencies, the Heckscher Foundation, and the Academy site directors meet on a quarterly basis to discuss development of services and to troubleshoot and to coordinate client services.
Program Features	
Client eligibility	The Academy accepts all foster care youth from the five referring agencies who are 16 years and older as long as they are not a danger to themselves or others. The program does not have a minimum skill or literacy entry requirement.
Referral of clients	Enrollment of foster care youth in the Academy program requires a referral from one of the five participating agencies. The referral includes basic information about the young person such as contact information, placement, education and workforce history, and reason(s) for referral to the Academy. Referrals are sent directly to the Academy.
Follow-up and intake	Once a referral of a young person is received, an Academy advisor is assigned. The advisor follows up with the young person and invites her/him to an Academy orientation (overview of services and tour of site) and to an intake meeting to assess service needs. For youth interested in educational programming, the intake process includes a Test of Adult Basic Education to determine grade-level reading and math skills.
Service plans	Following the intake process the young person and his/her caseworker are invited to discuss the young person's service plan and goals. After intake the assigned Academy advisor follows up with the young person and monitors progress.
Access to services	Once they have become Academy members, youth are eligible to access services at any site while they are in foster care and after discharge. Sudden/lengthy absences from the program do not result in removal.
Services	The program provides a wide range of services—education, employment, and recreation—all under one roof. Core services (such as pre-GED and GED preparation courses, small group tutoring, and career development/job readiness programs and internships) are offered at both Academy sites. Other non-core services (such as mental health counseling at F·E·G·S and legal services at The Door) are offered based on each provider's capacities and strengths. Building off existing capacities and funding sources, many of the services available to Academy clients were offered at F·E·G·S and The Door prior to their participation in the Academy.
Program start and end dates	The Academy accepts clients year-round. Service plans are individually tailored, and services can be accessed both while a young person is in care and after discharge. The program does not have set start and end dates or a pre-defined length.

Findings: Key Features of the Academy

Based on interviews and observations, Vera identified three features that make the Academy program unique: flexibility, integrated services, and post-care services. This section discusses each of these key features.

Flexibility

> *So many programs work with the kid who's already kind of got it together.*
> *Everyone wants to work with these kids. But what about my kid who's got*
> *criminal issues, drug issues, temper issues, shows up one day and not the next?*
> —Foster care agency program director

Most service programs require clients to meet specific eligibility criteria, such as having a high school diploma or a GED. Remedial education programs, for example, often exclude youth who have low reading levels. Such requirements are often not met by foster care youth who have experienced interruptions in schooling and are disconnected from support networks. As a result, these programs often do not serve the youth who need them most.

The Academy does not require youth to meet eligibility criteria. This open enrollment policy allows it to provide services to youth who are excluded from other programs for failing to meet eligibility criteria. The Access GED Program offered by the New York City Department of Education, for example, provides GED preparation classes to youth who can read at the sixth-grade level or above.[32] According to client intake data provided by the Academy, 43 percent of the foster care youth who enrolled at the Academy would not meet this requirement.[33]

The Academy is able to remain accessible to lower-performing youth because of its flexible funding source and its emphasis on incremental, individualized goals. Many other programs rely on funding that is tied to standard benchmarks of success. Linking outcomes and funding aims to keep programs accountable and ensure that funds are used efficiently. But this approach can lead programs to accept and retain only clients who are likely to meet specific benchmarks—such as full-time employment or graduation from high school—that may not be realistic given a young person's challenges and history. Instead, the Academy assesses youth according to individual, incremental benchmarks that consider the variation in skills that aging-out youth possess and the specific challenges they encounter. In lieu of long-term measures such as high school graduation, the Academy assesses youth on incremental outcomes such as improved math and reading skills.

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[32] New York City Department of Education, Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. Access GED Program Model—Learning for Life Beyond the Test. Available at http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/0FBF0CCF-2686-4F0F-B503-70A535320BAE/0/ACCESSGEDLOWRESOPTIMIZEDforwebsite92408.pdf

[33] The Academy database includes TABE test scores for 67 clients who were active in the Academy program. The average score on the reading section was 6.8, or between a sixth-grade and seventh-grade reading level. About 43 percent obtained a score of 6 or below.

Staff from the referring agencies who were interviewed for this study stated that the Academy's open enrollment policy was a distinctive feature of the program. As one foster care program director said,

> *For our most challenging groups, in the past we've been really disappointed by other programs, certainly by the Department of Education. We feel they purposefully hold our young people out [because] they're bad for their numbers....The Academy has filled that gap.*

In addition to flexible enrollment requirements, the Academy's design as a partnership between foster care agencies and service providers allows the program to develop services based on the actual needs of clients even as they change over time. Rather than adhering to a pre-defined menu of services, the service providers are able to design new programming for youth in response to agency requests. The Jewish Child Care Association, for example, operates a group home that serves young people with significant developmental delays. The Academy site at FEGS offered this group a new sheltered internship program where the young people could perform as interns, often on-site, under the close supervision and mentorship of an Academy staff member. Stakeholders from the referring agencies noted that this program—which could not have been created without the flexible approach taken by the Academy and the funder—fills a service gap for youth who would otherwise be unable to participate in work programs and for whom very limited options are available.

The Academy also provides services to youth whether or not they are in school and offers night and weekend services to accommodate various schedules. Research has shown that this flexibility increases youth participation and engagement, which in turn makes youth more likely to achieve individual benchmarks.[34]

Integrated services

Because each foster care agency tends to serve only a small number of youth who will age out of the system, their in-house services are often general in content and do not address the wide range of specialized needs of youth in their care.[35] As a result, youth are referred to providers outside their agencies for additional services. This leads to several problems. First, services that focus on one skill usually serve a young person for a relatively short period of time, which lowers the young person's chances of building lasting relationships with peers and adults. Second, services are usually offered in different locations, an inconvenience particularly in a large city like New York that leads to lower levels of engagement. Third, because these programs are not designed in concert, overlap or gaps in content are common. Finally, referring youth to services that focus on one skill often requires youth to choose between services offered at competing times or

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[34] See, for example, Robert Ivry and Fred Doolittle, *Improving the Economic and Life Outcomes of At-Risk Youth* (New York: MDRC, 2003). Available at http://www.mdrc.org/publications/361/concept.html.
[35] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008.

locations.[36] This is particularly problematic if youth must choose between employment services to meet short-term financial need and education or training to achieve long-term goals.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the most successful programs provide integrated services that meet youth's educational, employment, training, recreational, and other needs.[37] The Academy provided such services at both of its sites. The Infused GED program at The Door, for example, combined GED preparation courses with work-readiness workshops for youth with a reading level below third-grade and places these youth in paid internships. This integration of services encourages youth to participate and increases the likelihood of meeting their multiple needs. Providing these services in one location also gives youth an opportunity to develop sustained attachments to adult service providers. Research indicates that this type of relationship helps programs to retain clients over time.[38] Mentor relationships have been shown to correlate with improved psychosocial outcomes for youth, and since aging-out youth have often experienced many changes in placement, sustained relationships may be even more important for them than for others.

Post-care services

New York State mandates that youth in foster care receive services while they are in care. Many stakeholders interviewed noted, however, that youth in care tend to underestimate the challenges they will face when they are on their own and thus to under-utilize the services available to them. As an agency staff explained, "They really don't get it until they get out there and fall on their face." Follow-up services after discharge, however, are not mandated for former foster youth after the age of 21.

Unlike other community programs available to discharged youth, the Academy helps youth to build ongoing relationships that make post-care services more accessible and provide youth with comfort and security in returning to the Academy should they find that they need the program's services at a later date. "These kids hate the system," explained one agency staff member. "They don't want to go to the Children's Center for a workshop….Anything outside of the realm of ACS, for these kids, is much more helpful." In serving as a bridge between foster care and life in the community, the Academy is in line with Children's Services plan, mentioned earlier, to connect youth with support systems in the community before they are discharged from care.

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[36] Ivry and Doolittle, 2003; Packard et al., 2008.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ivry and Doolittle, 2003.

Findings: Implementation Challenges

The Academy encountered three major implementation challenges during its first two years:

- coordinating service delivery between the two service providers;
- developing a standardized information-sharing procedure; and
- managing communication with program partners.

This section will discuss each of these challenges and the program's attempts to address them.

Coordinating service delivery

The Academy's initial structure—providing services at two sites with contrasting cultures and areas of expertise—allowed youth with diverse interests and needs to access a range of program services. However, it also presented several challenges in attempting to combine two contrasting service models—the "franchise model" and the "comparative advantage service model." Under the franchise model, program sites provide similar or identical pre-defined services while operating independently (along the lines of Starbucks Coffee stores). This model is most appropriate when clients have similar needs but the demand for services is beyond the capacity of a single program provider, or services are needed in different locations to allow for more convenient access. Under the comparative advantage model, program sites specialize in different services based on their organizational expertise, capacity, and culture. This model is most appropriate when clients' needs vary and the range of services needed is beyond the expertise of a single provider. Under the franchise model, the assumption is that all services should be able to be accessed at any one site, but the comparative advantage model assumes that only by accessing multiple sites will clients be able to take advantage of the full range of services. While the franchise model imposes structure and detailed services, the comparative advantage model provides the flexibility to develop unique services.

During its first two years, the Academy program could be viewed as a hybrid between these two service delivery models. On the one hand, the decision to have two Academy providers was motivated by differences between the providers' locations, organizational cultures, and services (comparative advantage model). According to foster care agency staff interviews, the F·E·G·S Academy site was perceived as comfortable, unintimidating, and more appropriate for youth who might feel overwhelmed or anxious in other environments, or to youth who have trouble focusing. The Door Academy site was perceived as more open; its lack of structure was thought to be inviting to clients who might associate openness and dynamism with the kinetic appeal of "youth culture." Similarly, stakeholders from the referring agencies noted that the two Academy sites offered diverse programming fitted for different groups of clients.

> *The kid who's perfectly suited for a sheltered internship [offered at F·E·G·S] is a totally different kid than the one suited for the Bloomberg internship program*

> *[offered at The Door]….And it's great that they offer such varied programs,*
> *you've got after-school programs, and GED programs …"Would you like to play*
> *some drums after school, honey?" is different from, "You need a job."*
> —Foster care agency educational/vocational specialist

On the other hand, the providers' geographical spread made it necessary for both sites to provide similar core services such as GED preparation and work readiness programs for youth who could only access a single Academy site (franchise model). The stakeholders did not, however, have an initial understanding as to which service delivery model the Academy was aiming for.

Initially, cultural differences between the two sites led each to operate more or less independently. The development of varied programming in turn allowed the Academy to serve a large group of clients with diverse needs. The differences in culture and often in client populations, however, did not encourage the two sites to coordinate their services. In the franchise model, this autonomy is expected but is preceded by an extended design period in which pre-defined core services are mandated and implemented. Since this design period did not occur, the Heckscher Foundation began to take a more hands-on role and provided detailed suggestions and recommendations about the program's day-to-day management. This was often delivered though the workforce development consultant hired to assist with the development of the Academy.

Interviews suggest that while the Heckscher Foundation's increased involvement filled in important coordination gaps, it came with a few significant drawbacks. As advice and recommendations were given to the service providers through the foundation's consultant, it was not always clear to the service providers whether these recommendations were program requirements or suggestions. Further, the providers did not initially expect to be actively managed, and this led to tensions among some program partners.

> *When we got chosen to be providers, what we heard was that the agencies were*
> *excited about the two of us because we were so different that they couldn't*
> *choose, and they wanted both. So what my biggest frustration was that there was*
> *demand from agencies that you have two different things—an apple and an*
> *orange—but then in the implementation it was like—be a pear.*
> —Service provider agency manager

Finally, it also required the Heckscher Foundation and the two service providers to expend significant time and energy on coordination efforts.

Despite significant efforts on the part of the providers themselves, and repeated prodding from the foundation and from Vera evaluators, the two sites never developed a consistent and coherent set of protocols and practices for working together.

Developing a standardized information-sharing procedure

When the implementation process began, the program lacked a standardized procedure for collecting clear, accessible, and up-to-date information about the services that were provided. Each site developed its own database with different data elements and incompatible structures that made merging the two databases impossible. The lack of a standardized information collection procedure limited the ability of the Academy's youth advisors to serve their clients most efficiently and effectively. It also presented a logistical challenge when staff wanted to refer clients from one site to the other. According to a staff member at one of the referring agencies, youth who began the program at the F.E.G.S site and then switched to The Door had to repeat the entire intake process.[39] These circumstances likely contributed to the relatively small number of clients (about 14 percent) who took advantage of services at both sites.[40]

Data from interviews and observations points to two specific and interrelated obstacles to coordinating information-sharing practices between program sites. First, making significant changes to Academy operations at each site became increasingly challenging as more youth enrolled in the program because the day-to-day pressures of service delivery strained the capacity of program staff. The relatively small number of staff designated to work only for the Academy faced time pressures that limited their efforts to develop standard procedures for sharing information and working with youth. As might be expected, staff and administrators prioritized their primary responsibility—building their capacity to serve youth at their locations—and used the remaining time to work out other issues. As the Academy grew, that discretionary time diminished.

Second, differences in organizational culture and history affected the Academy providers' ability to coordinate with each other. F.E.G.S has long received substantial portions of its funding through government contracts, most of which have a range of programmatic and financial reporting requirements that are either specified in a request for proposals or negotiated during the contracting process. In contrast, much of The Door's funding historically comes from individual donations or general operating grants that have few or no mandated reporting requirements. This difference in funding history contributed to sharply contrasting reference points on coordinating intake procedures and information sharing practices.

Without a shared database, the Academy addressed the information-sharing challenge by creating an Academy blog on the Internet. The Door and F.E.G.S updated this blog with their service menus and schedules. In addition, the increased management role of the Heckscher Foundation facilitated the development of similar referral processes and agreement on the definitions of client status (e.g., "active" vs. "inactive" clients) between the two sites. Steps such as this allowed for some ability to merge client data between sites, although The Door and F.E.G.S continued to share their client data on an as-needed basis.

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[39] Agency staff member, confidential interview.
[40] Data reported by the Academy program from January 2007 through June 2008.

Managing communication with program partners

Partnerships between foster care agencies and community-based providers can help foster care youth connect with community resources and increase the likelihood that they will use these resources after they leave care. For such partnerships to be effective, however, foster care agencies should inform service providers about changes in the young person's placement and permanency goals, and service providers should provide referring agencies with information about a young person's participation, service plan, and progress in the program.[41]

As the Academy program rolled out, sharing client information raised ethical, legal, and logistical concerns for program partners. Academy staff at The Door, for example, felt that sharing personal information about youth was contrary to The Door's commitment to serve as a refuge for counter-cultural and disconnected youth. One Door staff member underscored this point, explaining that The Door refuses to allow the police to search its site for suspects without a warrant. Vera researchers attending steering committee meetings heard foster care agencies express similar hesitance about sharing clients' personal information with the Academy providers. As a result of this widespread ambivalence, the Academy often received referrals that were missing information needed to develop appropriate service plans.

Again, organizational culture and the history of each service provider created different reference points for sharing information with foster care agency partners. Many FEGS clients, young and old, come to the agency from other organizations as part of a formal referral process mandated by government contracts. Consequently, negotiating protocols about information sharing is a standard practice for them. A large percentage of The Door's clients, in contrast, are walk-ins or informal referrals. As a privately funded organization designed to provide a safe place for youth who often have little trust in traditional service providers or government organizations, The Door places a premium on the privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy of youth it serves.

Youth advisors at both Academy sites told Vera researchers that referring agencies' high staff turnover and lack of a primary contact person caused agency staff in general to be poorly informed about Academy programming. Academy staff believe that this lack of information may have contributed to the significant difference between the number of referrals to the Academy and the number of youth who became active in the program during its first few months of operation, before strategies such as instituting Academy liaisons (discussed below) were implemented. Staff at referring agencies speculated that the gap between referrals and participation may have also resulted from the fact that they referred their hardest to serve youth to the Academy.

To manage communication more effectively, the Academy steering committee provided a forum in which program partners could discuss their communication challenges and took an active role in resolving these challenges. After discussing concerns about privacy and

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[41] For example, the provision of monthly stipends to older youth in foster care requires agency caseworkers to document the participation of their clients in independent living or vocational training programs. (New York Codes, Rules, and Regulations, Title 18, § 430.12(f)).

confidentiality for several steering committee meetings, the committee agreed to require foster care agencies and Academy staff to obtain a youth's consent to share certain information. The committee also provided a forum that would reduce communications difficulties by encouraging participating foster care agencies to share best practices as they developed. For example, each agency developed its own system for monitoring youth attendance and progress. SCO Family of Services developed monthly report forms, which were later used for all Academy clients. Similarly, some referring agencies used Heckscher development grants to fund a liaison position. Agency liaisons handled referrals to the Academy and served as points of contact between their agency and the Academy advisors. Academy staff described the liaisons as crucial to opening the lines of communication and ensuring the best fit for youth. By the end of the second year, all referring agencies had appointed an Academy liaison. As communication improved, the gap between referrals and active members decreased.[42]

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[42]Academy manager, confidential interview.

Recommendations

During the implementation process, Academy staff and the referring agencies worked together to address the challenges discussed above and serve program clients effectively. The following recommendations aim to guide program partners as they continue working to produce better outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. The first three recommendations provide guidance for improving the program. The remaining recommendations provide guidance for expanding the program.

Recommendations for improving the program

Maintain the program's three key features. Three key features—a lenient intake policy, outsider status, and a unique conglomeration of services—are a core source of the Academy's strength.

The "easy to get in, impossible to be kicked out" philosophy is valued by the Academy's foster care agency partners and is appropriate to a program for foster youth. Stakeholders credit this philosophy with allowing several of their clients to achieve personal milestones and say it has been particularly effective in engaging hard-to-reach youth.

The position of the Academy outside of, but linked to, the child welfare system allows the program to serve as a bridge between child welfare and independent living. Such post-care services and connections are particularly important given the evidence that youth tend to underestimate the challenges of leaving the system and the skills and resources they will need to live on their own.

The Academy's provision of multiple services under one roof facilitates the use of multiple services along a developmental trajectory and also provides a sustained opportunity for young people to connect with positive adults and mentors. Its integration of a range of education and employment services is particularly important for independent young adults who too often must choose between pursuing an education, honing long-term career skills, and making ends meet on daily basis.

Make structural changes in the program's design to expand possible funding sources. The flexible structure of the Academy, particularly it flexible entry requirements and flexible end dates might be a challenge to traditional funders. Some funding sources target sub-populations of the group the Academy serves, and almost all value a program that can demonstrate its effectiveness with data. To expand its funding base, the Academy should consider the following structural changes:

- **Marketing and contracting in-care and post-care services separately.** Many foundation or government grants are designed specifically for youth still in foster care, while others are designed for youth living independently. Packaging and pricing in-care and post-care services separately may improve the Academy's access these diverse funding sources.

- **Designing a systematic way to analyze outcome measures relative to the individual client's baseline at entry into the program.** While the Academy has been developing its database to better record clients' information, service access, and completion, it should place further emphasis on developing methods to quantify youth progress. For example, capturing service plans in a form that can be readily analyzed would allow the Academy to compare youth service completion to their intended service plan. This would increase the program's ability to report client outcomes while maintaining its emphasis on individualized, incremental outcome measures.

Give youth financial incentives for participation. Financial incentives have the potential to increase youth's participation in the Academy, increasing their access to services and the quality of their engagement.[43] Financial incentives are particularly appropriate for this client population because many choose employment over long-term skill-building activities to meet immediate financial needs. Financial incentives should be tied to achieving benchmarks in their service plan and be determined by the youth's Academy advisor in consultation with the young person and other appropriate Academy and foster care agency staff.

Recommendations for expanding the program

To meet the needs of the many youth aging out of foster care in New York City, the Academy or similarly modeled programs will have to expand. In two years, 327 young people were referred to the Academy, while in 2006 alone, more than one thousand aged out of New York City foster care. The following recommendations, based on lessons learned during the first two years of implementation, provide guidance for such expansion.

Specify core services and program mandates before adding program providers. Providing essential core services at multiple sites requires following a franchise model approach, in which these services and mandates are pre-specified. Pre-specification will ensure that all program sites can provide clients with similar services and similar levels of expertise. While this model requires substantial investment during the program's planning stages, it does not require the sites to coordinate their services themselves. Uniform core services would help clients move between program sites and promote a single, cohesive program identity.

Develop supplementary services at multiple program sites to maintain responsiveness and innovation. Foster care agency staff noted that a benefit of the Academy as a multi-site program was the diversity of services offered by the two Academy sites and each site's development of novel programming in response to agency needs. When selecting program providers, though, Academy decision makers should always ascertain their ability to deliver specified core program services before considering their ability to provide complementary, site-specific services.

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[43] For example, see Ivry and Doolittle, 2003.

Develop a centralized, web-based Academy database. As the Academy grew, the absence of a centralized database made it difficult to coordinate how the two sites delivered services. This increased the burden on program partners by necessitating that they share client data on an ad hoc basis. A centralized, web-based database would allow Academy advisors to monitor and support clients as they access multiple Academy sites and provide better coordination between in-care and post-care services. It would also provide the organization flexibility to add or change program providers based on need and demand and give agency caseworkers appropriate access to client records to track client progress more effectively and further support dual ownership between the Academy and the agencies.

Develop an Academy web site that can be updated by multiple program partners. The Academy web site should include an up-to-date menu of services to improve the dissemination of information to agency caseworkers and potential Academy clients. It should also provide Academy advisors with information about services and programming at other Academy sites, including contact information for the lead staff person at those sites. Ideally, an interactive web site should allow secure online referrals of clients and link to the Academy database. Finally, adding select mandatory fields—such as personal identifiers, reasons for referrals, and agency contacts—could diminish the need to return to referring agencies for missing information.

Develop a program headquarters. The Academy steering committee should consider centralizing the organization's back-office operations in a single location or headquarters. This would allow the system to be more effective in implementing additional pre-specified services and program mandates, developing and maintaining a web site and database, and updating and developing Academy-wide services. A central headquarters would also grant a central managing body clear authority to monitor the implementation of the program at each site.

Appoint Academy liaisons at all referring agencies. Academy and foster care agency staff agreed that Agency liaisons— a position at referring agencies responsible for sending youth to the Academy and following-up on their progress, as well as for routine communication with the Academy—were essential to effective communication and problem solving both at their own agency and between their agency and the Academy. The liaisons should have access to the agency's database and report to a high-level agency administrator. The liaison should take an active role in introducing young people to the Academy.

Conduct a rigorous evaluation. Regardless of the number of providers delivering these services, best practices dictate that service providers be periodically subject to oversight and evaluation. A rigorous evaluation will help to determine the program's impact on long-term outcomes for youth aging out of foster care, could help attract additional funding, and would encourage service providers in other jurisdictions to replicate the Academy model.

Conclusion

In its first two years, the Academy provided flexibility in program design and enrollment that allowed a wide range of youth to access services. It also integrated education and employment services and connected youth to an advisor to facilitate the use of multiple services that can serve them at each stage of their development. Finally, it provided a much-needed bridge between in-care and post-care services, allowing youth to form a community connection while in care that they can continue access in the difficult period immediately following discharge. These key features represent a new approach to engaging youth who are aging out of foster care, and program partners believe that, in time, the program will produce better outcomes for this population.

Running such a program requires the development of communication and coordination protocols and infrastructure to harness the potential of multiple organizational partners. It also requires an initial investment of time and money to build understanding among partners and to invest in the technology that will ease information flow. With a higher share of foster care youth aging out than ever before, the lessons learned by the Academy program can guide service providers who take on the important and challenging work of preparing youth for their future.

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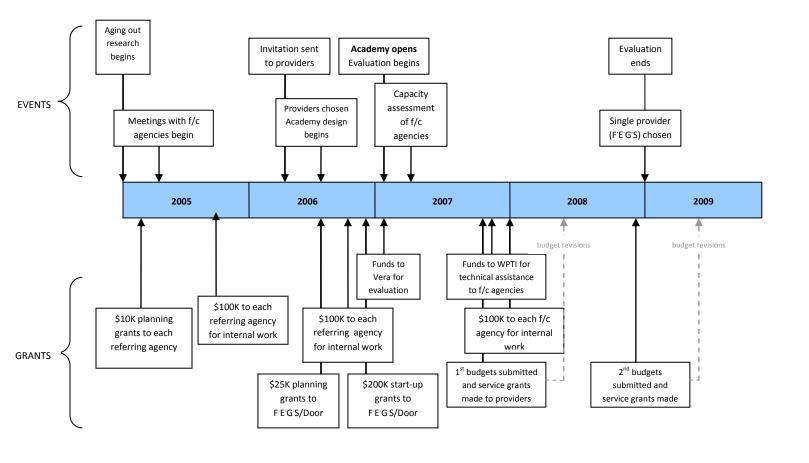
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Appendix A: Academy Timeline of Events and Grants[44]

A timeline diagram showing Events and Grants from 2005 to 2009.

EVENTS

- Aging out research begins
- Meetings with f/c agencies begin
- Invitation sent to providers
- Providers chosen / Academy design begins
- **Academy opens** / Evaluation begins
- Capacity assessment of f/c agencies
- Evaluation ends
- Single provider (FEGS) chosen

Timeline: 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009

budget revisions (2008)   budget revisions (2009)

GRANTS

- $10K planning grants to each referring agency
- $100K to each referring agency for internal work
- $100K to each referring agency for internal work
- Funds to Vera for evaluation
- Funds to WPTI for technical assistance to f/c agencies
- $100K to each f/c agency for internal work
- $25K planning grants to FEGS/Door
- $200K start-up grants to FEGS/Door
- 1st budgets submitted and service grants made to providers
- 2nd budgets submitted and service grants made