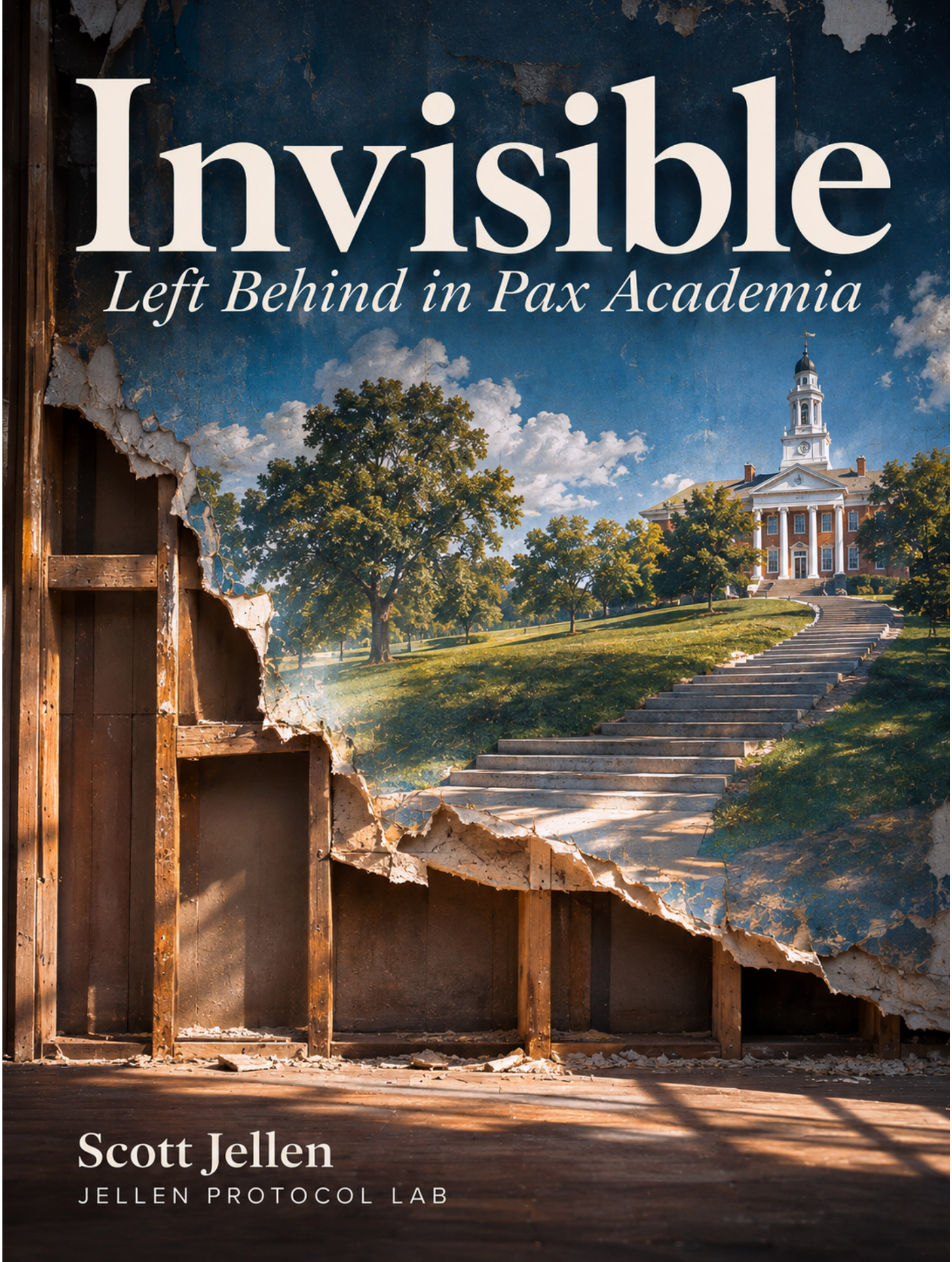
Invisible

Left Behind in Pax Academia



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Abstract

During the period this paper calls Pax Academia, approximately 1990 through 2010, the United States increasingly treated postsecondary education as a central pathway to economic opportunity. Yet young people emerging from public foster care faced substantial disadvantages in reaching and completing that pathway, even as governments and educational institutions developed programs intended to improve their outcomes.

Invisible examines the discontinuity between public responsibility for childhood and the practical conditions required for independent adulthood. It investigates the informal family support underlying educational opportunity, the fragmentation of institutional responsibility, and the distinction between providing formal access and sustaining the capacity to use it. Historical evidence is considered alongside more recent educational outcomes and evaluations of transition-support programs.

The paper also examines whether more effective transition assistance could produce additional long-term economic and fiscal benefits. It distinguishes observed outcomes from projected returns, individual benefits from taxpayer savings, and program participation from population-level attainment.

The central question is not whether foster-experienced young people were recognized by public institutions, but whether that recognition translated into a dependable pathway toward adult opportunity. The paper proposes continuity without custody as an institutional principle, emphasizing voluntary access to assistance, accountable handoffs between institutions, and the preservation of adult autonomy. This approach remains a proposal for implementation and evaluation rather than a demonstrated solution.

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1. Pax Academia

For much of the late twentieth century, the United States increasingly organized its understanding of economic opportunity around higher education.

College was no longer simply an institution for a relatively narrow professional class. It became an expectation attached to upward mobility, economic security, social legitimacy, and participation in an economy that placed growing value on specialized knowledge.

The degree became more than evidence of education.

It became a credential for entry into the American future.

This paper refers to the period from approximately 1990 through 2010 as **Pax Academia**: an era in which higher education acquired extraordinary institutional and cultural authority as the preferred pathway into economic advancement.

The term is an analytical designation, not an established historical period or a claim that the years were uniformly prosperous, affordable, or equitable. It identifies a historical convergence: post-secondary education was becoming increasingly central to economic opportunity, public policy was encouraging broader participation, and educational credentials were acquiring greater importance in the transition to adulthood.

That convergence matters because the expanding public expectation of higher education continued to depend on resources that educational institutions did not uniformly provide. Housing, financial assistance, practical guidance, and the ability to recover from setbacks frequently remained matters of private family support.

For young people leaving foster care, this arrangement exposed a particular institutional contradiction. Government had assumed responsibility for their protection and development during childhood, while the educational pathway increasingly expected of young adults depended partly on continuing support that could not be assumed after care ended.

Pax Academia did not create that contradiction. The difficulties associated with leaving foster care existed before the period and continued afterward. The era provides the historical setting in which a growing national expectation of educational advancement can be examined alongside the limits of the institutional arrangements intended to help young people achieve it.

That alignment was visible in enrollment.

In fall 1990, approximately 12 million undergraduate students were enrolled in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions. By fall 2000, enrollment had increased to approximately 13.2 million. In fall 2010, it exceeded 18 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

The expansion was substantial.

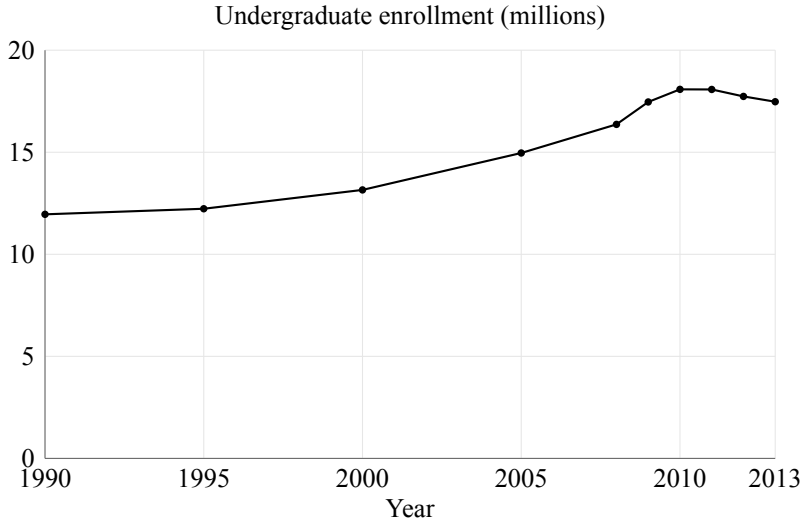


Figure 1: U.S. Undergraduate Enrollment, 1990–2013. Enrollment reached approximately 18.1 million in 2010 before declining after 2011.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2016), Digest of Education Statistics, Table 303.70. Selected years.

It reflected more than one development. Demographic change, labor-market expectations, expanded educational access, community-college participation, financing arrangements, and the growth of the postsecondary sector all contributed to the changing scale of American higher education.

Enrollment alone does not establish that educational opportunity became equally available or that every additional student received an economic return sufficient to justify the cost.

It establishes the scale of an institutional transformation.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, higher education had become one of the principal systems through which the United States expected to develop its future workforce.

By 2009, that expectation had become an explicit presidential policy ambition.

On February 24, 2009, President Barack Obama addressed a joint session of Congress and called for every American to pursue at least one year of higher education or career training beyond high school. He included community colleges, four-year institutions, vocational education, and apprenticeships within that expectation.

The administration also established an ambition for the United States to regain the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020 (Obama, 2009).

The significance was not merely the numerical goal.

Education beyond high school was being described as a national obligation attached to individual advancement and collective economic competitiveness.

The expectation extended beyond a particular university, degree, or profession.

It was becoming a governing assumption about adulthood.

The boundaries of Pax Academia require qualification.

The year 1990 does not mark the beginning of American higher education's expansion. That process had been underway for decades. It serves here as the beginning of a historical observation period during which the relationship between postsecondary education and expected economic opportunity became increasingly pronounced.

Growth was uneven. Between 2000 and 2010, undergraduate enrollment increased by approximately 37 percent. The final years of that expansion coincided with the Great Recession, which contributed to increased postsecondary participation, particularly at community colleges.

Using October Current Population Survey data, the Census Bureau documented an increase of approximately three million students in total college enrollment, including graduate students, between 2006 and 2011. Enrollment at two-year colleges increased by approximately 33 percent during that period. Overall college enrollment subsequently declined as economic conditions improved (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

The year 2010 therefore provides a useful historical boundary. Undergraduate enrollment had reached a near-term high, and the national expectation of education beyond high school had received explicit presidential endorsement. The period had brought the expansion of enrollment, the institutional importance of credentials, and the public expectation of continued education into particularly close alignment.

It also marked a transition in the public response to young people leaving foster care. On October 1, 2010, states began collecting data for the National Youth in Transition Database (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2008). The same date marked the beginning of federal fiscal year 2011, when states could first exercise the new option for federally supported extended foster care under the Fostering Connections Act of 2008.

These developments did not resolve the disadvantages examined in this paper. They illustrate that the educational expansion and the recognition of problems in the transition from foster care were developing alongside one another.

Pax Academia is consequently not defined as an era that ended because higher education lost its authority in 2010. The date closes the period examined here because it captures a culmination of enrollment growth and public educational expectation, alongside an important shift toward more systematic transition support and outcome measurement.

The institutional arrangements created during that period continued afterward, as did the educational disparities experienced by young people with foster-care histories. Later evidence is therefore used to examine the consequences and evolution of the historical structure, not to suggest that conditions observed in the 2020s necessarily existed in identical form between 1990 and 2010.

Pax Academia was therefore not simply a period when more Americans attended college.

It was a period when the relationship between education and opportunity became increasingly institutionalized.

The economic significance of that expectation was measurable.

Bureau of Labor Statistics historical data show that, in 2000, full-time wage and salary workers aged twenty-five and older holding a bachelor's degree or higher had median usual weekly earnings of $891, compared with $505 for high school graduates without college, measured in current dollars. By 2010, the corresponding figures were $1,144 and $626 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

The earnings advantage associated with a college credential was therefore substantial. In 2010, workers holding at least a bachelor's degree earned approximately 83 percent more per week at the median than workers whose highest completed education was high school.

These figures describe differences among employed workers, not the causal return to obtaining a degree. They do not account fully for differences in occupation, experience, ability, or other characteristics. Nor do they establish that every college graduate received an economic advantage. But they demonstrate the wage structure within which postsecondary education was increasingly presented as a pathway to advancement.

The cost of pursuing that pathway was also changing.

According to the College Board, enrollment-weighted average published tuition and fees for in-state students at public four-year institutions increased from approximately $3,800 in 1990–1991 to $9,070 in 2010–2011, measured in constant 2020 dollars. At public two-year institutions, average published in-district tuition and fees increased from approximately $1,810 to $3,260 over the same period (Ma, Pender, and Libassi, 2020).

These figures represent published prices rather than the net amounts students paid after grants and other assistance. They also exclude many living expenses associated with attending college. Financial aid, public subsidies, and institutional circumstances substantially affected individual costs.

Nevertheless, the historical relationship was consequential.

The United States increasingly encouraged educational attainment within an economy that rewarded higher credentials, while the published price of higher education was rising faster than general inflation.

The potential reward was significant.

So were the resources required to pursue it.

For young people with dependable family assistance, the costs and uncertainties of higher education could be distributed across a wider household network. For those without comparable support, the same educational opportunity could demand a much larger share of their available resources.

The expansion of educational opportunity therefore occurred alongside growing questions about who possessed the practical capacity to use it.

Students were encouraged to pursue credentials. Employers used those credentials to evaluate applicants. Governments supported access through financial aid, public institutions, and training programs. Families increasingly organized expectations about their children's futures around education beyond high school.

The resulting system offered real opportunities.

Colleges and universities developed knowledge, supported scientific discovery, expanded professional access, and provided routes into occupations that might otherwise have remained inaccessible.

Community colleges created relatively accessible entry points for students whose academic preparation, finances, geography, or family circumstances made immediate enrollment at a four-year institution difficult.

For many Americans, postsecondary education changed the possibilities of their lives.

But the public promise contained a private prerequisite.

Entering and completing higher education required more than admission, tuition assistance, and academic ability.

Students needed somewhere to live.

They needed transportation, books, meals, reliable information, and sufficient financial stability to remain enrolled.

They needed help navigating applications, deadlines, financial aid, institutional requirements, and decisions whose consequences were not always apparent when those decisions were made.

And they needed some capacity to recover when circumstances changed.

A failed semester did not necessarily end an educational career for a student who could return home.

A missed application deadline could be corrected with help.

A financial emergency could be absorbed by parents, relatives, or other trusted adults.

A summer without campus housing could become a summer at home.

These forms of support were not universal. Many students navigated college without dependable family assistance, and some families could provide only limited resources.

Nevertheless, private support often supplied capabilities that the formal educational system did not itself guarantee.

The campus measured enrollment.

The financial-aid office measured eligibility.

The university measured academic progress.

The family frequently supplied continuity between those measurements.

That distinction matters because the promise of educational opportunity was increasingly public, while many of the conditions necessary to realize it remained private.

The system could expand access without fully replacing the informal resources that made access sustainable.

It could reduce tuition without eliminating housing insecurity.

It could provide admission without providing a dependable adult relationship.

It could create an educational opportunity without guaranteeing that a student possessed the practical capacity to use it.

This was not a contradiction affecting only one population.

Low-income students, first-generation students, working adults, students with disabilities, and young people experiencing family instability could confront different versions of the same difficulty.

But one population occupied a particularly revealing position within the American institutional structure.

These were young people for whom the government had already assumed a formal responsibility during childhood.

Children entering foster care did not merely encounter public institutions through schooling, financial aid, or employment policy.

They entered a system in which government took responsibility for their protection and welfare because ordinary family arrangements could not safely continue in their existing form.

That responsibility made the transition to adulthood unusually consequential.

The public system was not simply another institution offering educational opportunity.

It had already been involved in the conditions under which the young person would reach that opportunity.

During Pax Academia, the United States increasingly expected its young adults to obtain postsecondary education while relying, to varying degrees, on family and household resources that were rarely treated as part of the educational promise itself.

For young people emerging from foster care, the availability and continuity of those resources could not be assumed.

The significance of that difference was already becoming apparent during Pax Academia.

In November 2004, the Government Accountability Office documented difficulties young people experienced while transitioning from foster care into independent living. Among the problems identified were limited access to affordable housing, insufficient employment and credit histories, and the absence of someone able to cosign a rental agreement. States had expanded independent-living assistance, but the services available did not consistently resolve these practical barriers (Government Accountability Office, 2004).

These difficulties were directly relevant to educational opportunity.

A young person might qualify for financial assistance and possess the academic ability to attend college while lacking the stable housing or practical support necessary to remain enrolled. The problem was not necessarily exclusion from an educational institution. It could arise from the conditions surrounding participation.

Research conducted during the same period also suggested that the duration of public support was associated with educational participation.

In 2007, Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack examined outcomes from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. The researchers compared young people in Illinois, where remaining in foster care until age twenty-one was an option, with their counterparts in Iowa and Wisconsin, where young people generally left care at eighteen.

By age twenty-one, approximately 58 percent of the Illinois participants had attended college, compared with 29 percent in Iowa and 31 percent in Wisconsin. Approximately 38 percent of the Illinois participants had completed at least one year of college, compared with 16 and 17 percent in Iowa and Wisconsin, respectively (Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack, 2007).

The differences were substantial. The researchers also found that the association between state of residence and educational participation remained strong after adjusting for observed characteristics of the young people.

The comparison was not a randomized evaluation. Differences in state policy, participant characteristics, and other conditions could have influenced the results. The study therefore provides evidence consistent with a benefit from extended foster care without establishing that remaining in care independently caused the entire educational difference.

It also does not isolate the effects of coordination between educational, housing, and child-welfare institutions. Extended care can provide several forms of assistance simultaneously.

The finding is nevertheless relevant to Pax Academia. During a period when postsecondary education was becoming an increasingly prominent expectation, the duration and availability of public support were associated with substantial differences in educational participation among young people approaching adulthood.

The contradiction was therefore becoming visible within Pax Academia itself.

Educational advancement was increasingly expected, but the institutional arrangements supporting young people toward that advancement could end before their educational pathways had been established.

The public system was expanding access to opportunity while still confronting the question of how to sustain the conditions necessary to use it.

The question was therefore larger than whether the country would offer them college.

It was whether a country that had assumed responsibility for their childhood could establish a dependable passage into the adulthood that its educational institutions increasingly expected.

Pax Academia expanded the promise of opportunity.

The next question is who could realistically reach it.

2. The Children Outside the Promise

The expansion of American higher education did not reach every young person equally.

During Pax Academia, colleges and universities enrolled millions of additional students, governments supported broader access, and educational attainment became increasingly important to economic opportunity.

But one population entered this expanding system with a fundamentally different relationship to the institutions responsible for its development.

These were young people who had experienced foster care.

The distinction matters.

Foster care is not a single childhood experience or a uniform pathway into adulthood. Some children spend relatively short periods in care before returning to their families. Others are adopted, enter guardianship arrangements, live with relatives, or experience several different placements. Some remain in foster care through adolescence and leave the system upon reaching the applicable age limit.

The circumstances preceding foster care, the duration and stability of placement, the relationships available afterward, and the educational experiences accumulated along the way can differ substantially.

A young person who spent two years in foster care before being adopted at age ten does not necessarily enter adulthood under the same conditions as someone who remained in care until eighteen.

Nor should either be assumed to have the same educational prospects as every other person with a foster-care history.

This paper therefore distinguishes between **foster-experienced youth**, the broader population with a history of foster care, and **young people aging out of care**, those who reach the applicable age limit without leaving through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or another permanent arrangement.

The populations overlap.

They are not interchangeable.

That distinction becomes important because some of the most frequently repeated statistics about foster youth describe particular cohorts, ages, or educational outcomes rather than a nationally representative population.

The disparity itself, however, was already visible during Pax Academia.

In 2005, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study reported outcomes for adults who had experienced family foster care in Oregon and Washington. The researchers reviewed records for 659 alumni who had been in care between 1988 and 1998 and interviewed 479 of them between 2000 and early 2002.

The findings were striking.

Approximately 84.8 percent of the interviewed alumni had completed high school through a diploma or General Educational Development credential. Their overall secondary-school completion rate was relatively close to that of the comparison population.

Postsecondary participation was more common than bachelor's-degree completion.

Among the interviewed alumni, approximately 42.7 percent had participated in some form of postsecondary education, and 20.6 percent had completed a degree or certificate beyond high school.

But only 1.8 percent had completed a bachelor's or higher degree. Among alumni aged twenty-five and older, the rate increased to 2.7 percent. The report's detailed analysis compared that figure with bachelor's attainment of 27.5 percent among adults aged twenty-five through thirty-four in the general population (Pecora et al., 2005).

The difference was enormous.

It did not establish that 2.7 percent of all former foster youth would ever complete college. The study covered a particular population, observed at particular ages, with limitations associated with its sample and response rate.

The 1.8 percent figure measured bachelor's or higher degree completion, not all postsecondary attainment. The researchers separately reported vocational credentials and other forms of postsecondary participation.

But it established a serious contradiction.

At a time when the United States was increasingly organizing opportunity around education beyond high school, a studied population of young adults who had passed through public care was completing four-year degrees at a fraction of the rate observed among its peers.

The issue was not simply that these young people had never entered school.

Many had completed secondary education.

Some had entered postsecondary education.

Far fewer had completed the credentials that increasingly shaped professional access.

That difference between educational participation and educational attainment would become central to subsequent research.

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth provided another important window into the transition.

Beginning in 2002, researchers followed 732 young people from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin who were approximately seventeen or eighteen years old and still in foster care. Participants were interviewed repeatedly as they entered adulthood, with the final major wave conducted around age twenty-six.

At the age-twenty-six follow-up, 596 participants were interviewed, with educational-attainment data available for 593 respondents.

By age twenty-six, 45 percent of the young women and approximately one-third of the young men had completed at least one year of college.

Yet only 11 percent of the women and 5 percent of the men had completed a two-year or four-year college degree (Courtney et al., 2011).

The findings cannot be compared directly with the Northwest study's bachelor's-degree rate. The populations, educational measures, and observation ages differed.

Their broader implication was nevertheless consistent.

Educational participation was substantially more common than degree completion.

Young people entered the postsecondary system without necessarily progressing through it to a credential.

The Midwest Study also documented difficulties extending beyond education. Employment instability, low earnings, economic hardship, and housing insecurity were part of the adult circumstances researchers observed.

Those findings did not prove that limited educational attainment caused every subsequent difficulty. Nor did they establish that remaining in foster care longer would automatically resolve the problems.

They demonstrated that the transition to adulthood involved multiple interconnected outcomes.

College could not be examined entirely apart from the conditions under which a young person was expected to establish independence.

This was becoming increasingly clear as the national educational promise reached its height.

By 2009, the United States was explicitly promoting postsecondary education and training as an expectation for the next generation.

At approximately the same historical moment, researchers had already documented a population of young people whose transition from public care into that educational future was deeply uncertain.

The contrast was not invisible because the evidence was unavailable.

The evidence existed.

The more difficult question was what institutions would do with it.

The years following Pax Academia provide a broader and more complicated picture.

In 2025, Okpych and colleagues published a systematic review of research on secondary and post-secondary educational outcomes among students with experience in foster care.

The researchers reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2023 and retained seventeen publications meeting their methodological inclusion criteria.

The resulting estimates differed substantially from several statistics that had circulated for decades.

Across the studies meeting the review's inclusion criteria, high school diploma or GED completion ranged from approximately 69 to 85 percent, while postsecondary enrollment ranged from 29 to 64 percent. Degree-completion estimates from the Midwest Study were approximately 8 percent. Additional CalYOUTH findings supplied to the reviewers, using educational records collected when participants were approximately twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, indicated that 12 percent had completed a two-year or four-year degree (Okpych et al., 2025).

These estimates were not a single national measurement.

Most underlying findings came from regional studies. Postsecondary completion evidence depended heavily on the Midwest Study and California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study, with differences in sampling, data sources, and observation ages.

Nevertheless, the review identified an important problem with the public understanding of foster-youth education.

Statistics suggesting that only half of foster youth complete high school, roughly one-fifth attend college, and approximately 3 percent obtain a degree had persisted long after the studies underlying those numbers became dated.

Better-defined and longer-observed cohorts produced higher estimates.

That development matters.

A serious assessment of foster-youth educational outcomes cannot simply repeat the lowest historical number indefinitely.

Doing so would obscure changes in policy, program access, educational participation, and the evidence itself.

But higher estimates do not eliminate the disparity.

As a broad national benchmark, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that approximately 49 percent of adults aged twenty-five through twenty-nine in the noninstitutionalized U.S. population held an associate degree or higher in 2022, based on Current Population Survey data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

This was substantially higher than the degree-completion estimates among the foster-experienced populations examined in the research, although differences in cohort definitions, ages, and observation periods prevent a direct like-for-like comparison.

The populations were not perfectly matched, and the comparison does not establish the cause of the difference.

The national benchmark is consistent with a substantial educational divide, although differences in population, age, and observation period prevent it from establishing the precise magnitude of that disparity.

The problem was not adequately described by one historical percentage.

It was the persistent distance between educational opportunity and educational attainment.

Texas provides a more recent example of how that distance can be examined across an identified population.

A landscape analysis prepared for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board followed a cohort of 11,251 young people with foster-care experience who turned eighteen in 2019.

Between 2019 and 2023, 2,794 of those young people—approximately one-quarter of the cohort—enrolled in higher education.

Of those who enrolled, 542 obtained a postsecondary credential during the four-year follow-up period.

That represented approximately 19 percent of those who entered higher education, but only 4.8 percent of the original cohort (Watt et al., 2025).

The figures describe different stages of the same educational pathway.

The original population contained 11,251 young people.

The enrolled population contained 2,794.

The credential-attaining population contained 542.

Each number answers a different question.

How many young people had experienced foster care?

How many entered higher education?

How many completed a credential within the observed period?

The distinction is consequential.

A completion rate calculated only among college entrants describes the students who reached the institution.

It does not describe the educational outcome of the entire original population.

Conversely, a credential rate calculated across the original cohort incorporates young people who never enrolled, including those who may not have completed high school, pursued other opportunities, or encountered barriers before reaching a college campus.

Neither measure is inherently invalid.

Each describes a different point in the transition.

The Texas results also require an important temporal qualification. The four-year observation period does not establish how many members of the cohort will eventually earn a degree or certificate. Some may complete credentials later, especially if their education is interrupted or undertaken part-time.

The cohort also concerns young people with foster-care experience, rather than only those who aged out while still in state custody.

It would therefore be incorrect to present the 4.8 percent figure as a national lifetime graduation rate for youth aging out of foster care.

But within its defined population and observation window, the result reveals how sharply participation narrows between adolescence, college entry, and credential attainment.

It also raises a deeper institutional question.

If public educational policy primarily evaluates the students who successfully reach a campus, how does it account for the young people whose educational pathway ended before that campus became responsible for them?

If a support program improves retention among participants, how does that accomplishment relate to the broader population that never entered the program?

And if a tuition benefit exists, what does its availability establish about the young person's ability to make use of it?

These are questions of measurement and institutional responsibility, not simply statistical presentation.

They will be examined more fully later in this paper.

For now, the evidence establishes three conclusions.

First, severe educational disparities among foster-experienced young people were documented before Pax Academia ended.

Second, more recent research suggests that some frequently repeated historical estimates understate later or more broadly defined educational attainment, while confirming that substantial disparities remain.

Third, the difference between entering college and completing it is a central feature of the problem, not a technical detail.

The evidence does not establish a single cause.

It does not demonstrate that foster care itself explains the entire educational disparity, independent of the circumstances that brought children into care, the instability they experienced, family resources, school environments, or the conditions surrounding their transition to adulthood.

Nor does it establish that any one policy intervention would close the gap.

What it establishes is that the educational promise of Pax Academia encountered a population whose pathway into adult opportunity was markedly less reliable.

These young people were not uniformly without ambition, ability, or educational experience.

Many completed high school.

Many entered college.

Some completed degrees and established successful adult lives.

But the pathway repeatedly narrowed before educational participation could become sustained attainment.

That narrowing cannot be understood through tuition alone.

It requires examining the resources that ordinarily support a young person through the transition from dependence to education and from education to independent adulthood.

For many students, those resources had a familiar name.

Family.

For young people emerging from public care, their availability could not be assumed.

3. The Invisible Family

The American higher-education system measures students.

It does not fully measure the support systems standing behind them.

Colleges record enrollment, tuition, financial aid, academic performance, retention, graduation, and the credentials students ultimately receive. These measures describe important parts of educational participation.

But they do not capture everything required to sustain it.

A student may appear in institutional records as one individual while relying on a network of adults, households, relationships, and resources that extends far beyond the campus.

Parents may contribute tuition or living expenses.

Relatives may provide housing.

An adult may help navigate financial aid, select courses, complete paperwork, purchase a vehicle, or make an unexpected payment.

A student may return home between semesters, recover from a failed academic term, or postpone a decision while continuing to receive material support.

These contributions vary substantially across families.

Some young adults receive extensive financial assistance. Others support themselves, contribute to their parents' households, or have no reliable family help at all. Parents may want to provide assistance but lack the resources to do so.

The important distinction is that much of the support sustaining the transition into adulthood occurs outside the institutions formally responsible for education.

This paper refers to that structure as **the invisible family**.

The term does not describe one ideal family arrangement or assume that every student possesses supportive parents.

It describes the collection of informal resources and continuing relationships that can make formal educational opportunity usable.

The family may be biological, adoptive, extended, chosen, or composed partly of trusted adults who have no legal family relationship to the young person.

Its importance lies in the functions it performs.

Housing continuity.

Financial assistance.

Practical guidance.

Emotional support.

Emergency capacity.

And the opportunity to recover from decisions or circumstances that do not unfold as expected.

These functions are not necessarily provided by one person or household.

But when they are available, they can substantially alter the conditions under which a young adult pursues education.

The scale of continued family assistance is visible in contemporary evidence.

In surveys conducted in late 2023, Pew Research Center found that among young adults aged eighteen through twenty-four who had at least one living parent with whom they maintained contact, only 16 percent described themselves as completely financially independent from their parents.

Among young adults aged eighteen through thirty-four who had a living parent with whom they maintained contact, 44 percent reported receiving financial assistance from their parents during the preceding twelve months. Among those younger than twenty-five, the proportion was approximately 68 percent.

The assistance extended across ordinary expenses, including housing, medical costs, household bills, and education (Minkin et al., 2024).

The same research found that 79 percent of young adults aged eighteen through twenty-four turned to their parents at least sometimes for financial advice, while 77 percent sought advice concerning their jobs or careers (Minkin et al., 2024).

These findings do not describe the exact conditions of 1990 through 2010. They are later observations, and the surveyed population excludes young adults without a living parent with whom they maintain contact.

They nevertheless illustrate an important feature of American adulthood: financial independence and adult guidance often develop gradually rather than appearing at eighteen.

A legal birthday does not immediately eliminate economic dependence.

For many young adults, the transition is supported by relationships whose assistance changes over time.

A parent may pay tuition in one year, provide a bedroom in another, and offer advice or emergency assistance several years later.

The support is not necessarily continuous in amount.

It is continuous in availability.

That distinction is particularly important.

A young adult does not need to receive money every month to benefit from knowing that someone can help if the next month goes badly.

The ability to return home, borrow a small amount, obtain advice, or delay an immediate financial decision can affect choices before any assistance is actually used.

This paper uses **family reserve capacity** to describe that available but not necessarily exercised support.

The term is analytical rather than a separately measured financial category.

It includes material resources, practical assistance, trusted relationships, and some capacity to absorb disruption.

A young person with family reserve capacity may be able to remain in college after losing a job, experiencing an unexpected expense, or encountering an interruption in housing.

A young person without comparable support may face a different decision under otherwise similar circumstances.

A temporary difficulty can become a permanent educational exit.

This difference does not establish that every student with family support succeeds or that every student without it fails.

It identifies a source of unequal resilience that conventional measures of enrollment and financial aid do not fully capture.

During Pax Academia, the expansion of educational opportunity occurred within a society where this informal support was already important.

Research conducted during the period recognized the difference between ordinary transitions to adulthood and the circumstances of young people leaving public care.

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, reporting outcomes at age twenty-one in 2007, situated its investigation against a broader social transition in which many young adults continued receiving financial and emotional assistance from their parents beyond eighteen (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, et al., 2007).

The implication was consequential.

The public foster-care system could have a defined point at which formal custody and financial responsibility changed, while the ordinary social transition into adulthood continued for years afterward.

These were different timelines.

One was organized around legal and administrative eligibility.

The other followed the uncertain development of educational, financial, and practical independence.

Their boundaries did not necessarily coincide.

For a young person with a dependable family network, an unsuccessful semester may be a setback.

For someone whose housing, food, transportation, and income depend on remaining continuously enrolled or employed, that same semester can threaten the foundations of independent living.

The academic problem becomes a housing problem.

The housing problem becomes a financial problem.

The financial problem makes returning to school more difficult.

This is how an educational interruption can become a developmental interruption.

The process can begin with something as ordinary as the academic calendar.

A university may provide housing for the fall and spring semesters while operating under different arrangements during summer and winter breaks.

For students with dependable households elsewhere, the calendar does not necessarily threaten their housing.

They leave campus.

They return when classes resume.

But a young person for whom the dormitory is the primary stable residence may face an entirely different situation.

The semester ends.

The need for shelter does not.

This mismatch was documented during the final year of Pax Academia.

In May 2010, Human Rights Watch published *My So-Called Emancipation: From Foster Care to Homelessness for California Youth*. The investigation drew on interviews with sixty-three young people who had experienced homelessness after leaving California foster care, as well as other interviews and records.

It described young adults attempting to pursue postsecondary education while experiencing severe housing insecurity.

One young man interviewed by Human Rights Watch was attending community college while living in his truck. Other young people described difficulty securing housing when college residences closed for winter and summer breaks.

The report did not provide a representative estimate of how frequently those circumstances affected all former foster youth. Its interview sample was specifically selected from young people who had become homeless.

But the institutional problem it documented was concrete.

Enrollment did not guarantee a stable place to sleep.

And access to a college could not independently resolve the loss of housing associated with leaving foster care (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The distinction between the academic calendar and the housing calendar demonstrates why the invisible family matters.

A student with a permanent household may experience summer recess as a break from educational activity.

A student without dependable housing may experience the same period as a loss of shelter.

The institution sees the end of a semester.

The young person experiences a change in the conditions required to continue living and studying.

The same mismatch can appear through financial aid.

A grant or scholarship may reduce tuition while leaving other expenses unresolved.

Books, transportation, food, clothing, medical needs, housing deposits, and unexpected emergencies continue outside the tuition calculation.

A student may receive enough assistance to make enrollment possible without possessing enough financial stability to remain enrolled.

A 2010 exploratory study by Hernandez and Naccarato examined twelve programs providing scholarships and supportive services to foster-care alumni attending postsecondary institutions.

Based on interviews with program coordinators, the researchers identified six recurring categories of unmet needs: academic preparation, housing, financial assistance, emergency assistance, personal challenges, and advocacy (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).

The findings did not constitute a national evaluation of program effectiveness.

They demonstrated that organizations working directly with former foster youth already understood educational success as a problem involving more than tuition.

The practical requirements of education extended into ordinary adult life.

And the institutions distributing educational benefits were not necessarily organized to supply all of those requirements.

There is also a relational dimension.

Family assistance is not simply a transfer of money or housing.

Young adults often depend on people who can explain unfamiliar institutions, offer practical advice, recognize deteriorating circumstances, and remain involved when plans fail.

A financial-aid administrator may explain eligibility rules.

An academic adviser may identify the courses required for graduation.

A housing office may explain available accommodation.

Each performs a necessary institutional function.

But none necessarily possesses continuing responsibility for the student's development across education, employment, housing, and personal circumstances.

The family, when dependable, can connect those domains without requiring the young person to enter a separate program for each problem.

That coordinating function is difficult to reproduce through institutions organized around limited responsibilities.

It is also important not to assume that foster-experienced young people lack meaningful family relationships.

Many maintain relationships with siblings, grandparents, parents, foster parents, relatives, and other trusted adults.

Some receive substantial assistance through those relationships.

Others develop strong networks among mentors, peers, professionals, and chosen family.

Foster-care experience does not imply social isolation.

But the presence of relationships does not automatically establish the availability of the material and practical support needed for independence.

A later analysis from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study helps distinguish these functions.

Using interviews conducted when participants were approximately nineteen years old, Okpych and colleagues examined emotional support, tangible assistance, and advice or guidance among young people transitioning from foster care.

Among 611 surveyed young people, approximately 42 percent reported that they did not have enough people to turn to for emotional support, 47 percent reported insufficient sources of tangible assistance, and 35 percent reported insufficient sources of advice or guidance (Okpych et al., 2018).

The findings varied according to whether young people remained in extended care and the settings in which they lived.

Young adults still in care were more likely than those outside care to report sufficient tangible support and guidance. They were also more likely to identify professionals among the people providing assistance.

Importantly, remaining in extended care was not associated with a reduced likelihood of identifying relatives as support figures.

That result complicates a simple opposition between family and public care.

Institutional support and family relationships need not be substitutes.

They can coexist.

The relevant question is whether the young person possesses a sufficiently dependable network across the different demands of adulthood.

The study was conducted after Pax Academia, and its associations do not establish that extended care caused every observed difference.

But it clarifies the institutional problem identified earlier.

Support is multidimensional.

Having someone to talk to is not identical to having someone who can provide housing.

Having access to money is not identical to having someone who can explain a financial-aid decision.

Having an assigned professional is not identical to possessing a relationship that remains available after program eligibility ends.

Each form of support may matter.

Their availability cannot be inferred from the presence of any single one.

That is the limitation of treating formal educational access as a complete opportunity.

The institution can admit a student.

It can reduce tuition.

It can provide academic advising.

It can document progress.

But unless the student's surrounding conditions remain sufficiently stable, those interventions may not be enough to sustain participation through completion.

The invisible family supplies part of that surrounding stability for many young adults.

Where its functions are unavailable or unreliable, the educational system confronts needs that its traditional administrative boundaries were not necessarily designed to meet.

The resulting disadvantage is not simply financial.

It is a difference in the capacity to absorb interruption.

A young person with dependable support may be able to try, fail, recover, change direction, and try again without losing the basic conditions of adulthood.

A young person without comparable support may have fewer opportunities to make the same sequence of decisions.

The educational system measures the outcome.

It does not necessarily measure the number of recoverable mistakes permitted along the way.

That difference is central to *Invisible*.

Pax Academia increasingly treated education as a pathway through which individuals could establish adult opportunity.

But the pathway rested partly on informal household resources that were unevenly available and often outside the responsibility of educational institutions.

For young people emerging from foster care, those resources could not simply be assumed.

And the public system that had assumed responsibility for their childhood did not automatically possess a continuous institutional arrangement capable of replacing every missing function.

The problem was recognized.

Programs were created.

Benefits were established.

Research documented the consequences.

The next question is why those responses did not reliably close the distance between public care and adult opportunity.

4. Recognition Without Resolution

By the late twentieth century, governments understood that young people leaving foster care could encounter substantial difficulties establishing independent adult lives. Homelessness, unemployment, incomplete education, limited financial resources, and the absence of dependable adult support were not entirely unexpected outcomes.

They were among the reasons specialized transition programs existed.

The federal response began before the period examined in this paper.

In 1986, Congress established the Independent Living Program under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The program provided federal funding to help older adolescents in foster care prepare for adulthood.

Its original design focused on young people approaching the age at which they would leave the child-welfare system.

The objective was preparation for independence.

Services could support practical skills, employment preparation, education, and the transition into living arrangements outside foster care.

Subsequent amendments expanded eligibility and the period during which certain services could remain available.

By 1993, Congress had permanently authorized $70 million annually for the Independent Living Program under Public Law 103-66 (Fernandes, 2007).

That history establishes an important point.

The federal government recognized that foster care could not be evaluated solely by what happened before a child reached adulthood.

There was already a distinct transition problem.

But recognizing the transition as a problem did not establish a continuous institutional responsibility for the outcome.

The Independent Living Program provided resources to states for particular services.

It did not create a universal guarantee that every young person leaving foster care would possess stable housing, continuing educational support, employment, or the dependable relationships normally developed across the early adult years.

Nor could such results be produced simply through the availability of independent-living instruction.

The transition required more than knowledge of how to live independently.

It required opportunities and resources through which independence could become materially possible.

The next major federal intervention came in 1999.

The Foster Care Independence Act replaced the earlier program with the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

The legislation doubled annual mandatory federal funding for independent-living services from $70 million to $140 million.

It also expanded the program's purposes and the populations states could assist.

The new framework sought to improve educational and employment opportunities, help young people prepare for self-sufficiency, and support those who had already left foster care.

States could use part of their Chafee funding for room and board assistance for eligible young adults, subject to statutory limits.

The change was substantial.

Congress was no longer treating preparation for independence as a narrow activity occurring only immediately before emancipation.

The legislation acknowledged that young adults might continue needing assistance after leaving formal care.

But the program remained organized principally through federal grants administered by states.

The federal government established purposes, eligibility boundaries, funding rules, and accountability requirements.

States retained significant discretion over the services they would provide, how they would organize delivery, and how eligible young people would reach those services.

That flexibility allowed programs to respond to different local conditions.

It also meant that the practical assistance available to a young adult could depend heavily on geography, administrative capacity, and the organizations operating in the surrounding community.

A federal authorization was not the same as a uniform national service.

The distinction became particularly important in higher education.

In January 2002, the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments authorized the Chafee Education and Training Voucher program.

The program received its first federal funding for fiscal year 2003.

Eligible current and former foster youth could receive vouchers of up to $5,000 annually for qualifying postsecondary education and training expenses.

Under the rules then in effect, young people receiving an Education and Training Voucher at age twenty-one could continue participating until age twenty-three, provided they remained enrolled in a qualifying program and made satisfactory progress.

The vouchers could support recognized education costs rather than tuition alone.

This was a direct response to one of the central contradictions of Pax Academia.

The country was increasingly treating postsecondary education as a pathway to opportunity.

Congress was creating a dedicated financial instrument to help young people with foster-care experience participate in that pathway.

Yet the structure of the benefit still mattered.

The $5,000 ceiling was a statutory maximum, not a guaranteed payment to every eligible young person.

Receipt depended on eligibility, program administration, available funding, and other requirements.

And the voucher did not independently establish that a student would be admitted to college, remain housed, secure transportation, complete financial-aid documentation, or receive sufficient assistance to survive an interruption.

The benefit addressed an important part of the educational problem.

It did not encompass the entire transition into adulthood.

This is the distinction between **benefit availability and benefit realization**.

A benefit may exist in federal law.

A state may administer it.

An individual may qualify.

But the intended result depends on whether the individual can identify, obtain, and use the benefit under conditions that allow the larger objective to be achieved.

These are separate stages of institutional performance.

The first can be established through legislation.

The later stages require delivery, participation, continuity, and measurable outcomes.

That distinction was already evident in federal oversight during Pax Academia.

In November 2004, the Government Accountability Office published an evaluation of states' implementation of the Foster Care Independence Act.

The investigation examined how states used expanded federal funding, whether services had reached more young people, how programs coordinated across institutions, and whether governments could evaluate the effectiveness of the assistance being provided.

The report found meaningful progress.

Forty states reported expanding independent-living services to younger youth following the legislation.

Thirty-six reported expanding services to older youth.

States developed or improved programs addressing education, employment, housing, practical skills, and other needs.

These were substantive institutional responses.

They should not be dismissed merely because substantial disadvantages persisted.

But the same investigation found serious limitations.

Among forty states reporting the relevant information, the proportion of eligible foster youth receiving independent-living services in 2003 ranged from approximately 10 percent to 100 percent.

The figures came from state-reported data and should not be treated as perfectly comparable measures of service quality or eligibility.

Nevertheless, the variation demonstrated that implementation and reported reach differed significantly across states.

GAO also identified gaps in access to mental-health services, mentoring, and housing.

In the four states visited by investigators, young people described the difficulty of securing stable housing without employment histories, credit histories, or someone willing to cosign a lease.

Some housing assistance was insufficient in expensive areas.

Other assistance was geographically limited or available only under particular eligibility conditions.

Transportation difficulties further complicated access to programs, especially in rural communities.

These were not minor administrative details.

They were conditions affecting whether a young person could participate in education, maintain employment, or establish a stable adult household.

The report also identified shortcomings in coordination.

States generally reported increased cooperation with other public programs. But working relationships across child welfare, housing, health, education, and employment services remained inconsistent.

Officials did not always possess comprehensive information about the programs available in their own states or local areas.

Some potentially relevant federal housing resources were not being fully used.

The result was a fragmented service environment in which assistance could be available somewhere in the public system without being reliably connected to the young person who needed it.

A particularly important weakness concerned accountability.

GAO found that states had submitted required plans and reports, but differences in reporting formats and federal monitoring practices made it difficult to assess program performance consistently.

The federal government had expanded a program intended to improve adult outcomes without yet possessing adequate information to determine how effectively those outcomes were being achieved (Government Accountability Office, 2004).

That is a consequential institutional distinction.

The system could measure appropriations.

It could report services.

It could describe expanded eligibility.

But it could not necessarily establish whether the total arrangement was producing durable improvements in independence.

By 2007, GAO continued to identify unresolved challenges in coordinating services across the public systems that young people needed during the transition out of foster care (Government Accountability Office, 2007).

The issue was therefore not simply that public institutions had failed to notice a vulnerable population.

They had noticed.

They had legislated.

They had funded programs.

And federal oversight had documented important weaknesses in the arrangement.

Recognition was substantial.

Resolution remained incomplete.

The emerging higher-education response followed a related pattern.

Some institutions began developing programs specifically designed for students with foster-care experience.

In 1998, California State University, Fullerton established the Guardian Scholars Program in collaboration with the Orangewood Children's Foundation and private supporters.

The program began with three students (Ruble, 2024).

Its significance extended beyond financial aid.

Guardian Scholars combined educational assistance with forms of support that could include housing, mentoring, counseling, academic guidance, and practical help navigating college life.

It recognized that the conditions necessary for college completion were broader than tuition.

This was a different institutional response from providing a voucher alone.

Rather than treating education as an isolated financial transaction, it attempted to assemble several of the supports ordinarily distributed through family and community relationships.

The model later spread to other colleges and universities.

By the 2008–2009 academic year, California State University reported that eleven campuses had established programs for former foster youth and six additional campuses were developing similar arrangements.

Nearly 500 former foster youth were enrolled across the CSU system at that time (California State University, 2009).

This expansion demonstrated that universities themselves were beginning to recognize the limitations of conventional student services.

Students with foster-care experience could require assistance spanning academic, financial, housing, professional, and personal domains.

A program organized around those needs could provide more comprehensive support than an individual scholarship or waiver.

But the campus model also had a structural boundary.

It primarily served young people who had already reached an institution capable of offering the program.

The educational pathway before enrollment remained consequential.

A student who did not finish high school, never applied, could not relocate, or lacked the resources needed to enter college would not necessarily appear in the program's population.

Nor did the existence of a successful campus initiative establish that comparable support was available throughout an entire state.

In 2008–2009, some California State University campuses had established specialized programs while others were still developing them.

The institutional response was growing.

Its reach was not yet universal.

This creates an important distinction between the success of an intervention and the reach of the system containing it.

An individual campus could provide strong support to participating students.

That accomplishment would not, by itself, establish that the larger population of foster-experienced young people possessed a dependable educational pathway.

The distinction does not diminish the value of the campus program.

It identifies the additional question public systems must answer.

How many young people could reach it?

That question would become increasingly important as policymakers reconsidered the age boundaries of foster care itself.

In September 2007, Congress enacted the College Cost Reduction and Access Act.

Among its financial-aid provisions, the law expanded the definition of an independent student to include individuals who had experienced foster care at any time since age thirteen.

The revised eligibility criteria were reflected in federal student-aid guidance for the 2009–2010 award year.

For these students, independent status meant that federal aid eligibility would not depend on reporting parental income and assets in the ordinary manner.

This addressed a concrete administrative barrier.

A young person with foster-care experience could otherwise face requirements built around parental financial information that might be unavailable, irrelevant, or inappropriate.

The change recognized that the conventional family assumptions embedded in financial-aid administration did not fit every student's circumstances.

It altered how the student was classified.

But independent status for financial-aid purposes was not the same as material independence.

The student might no longer need a parent's income to establish aid eligibility.

The student could still need housing, transportation, reliable information, and emergency assistance.

The law corrected part of the administrative relationship between family and financial aid.

It did not automatically replace the practical functions that family support could provide.

The federal government took another step in October 2008 through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.

The legislation allowed states, beginning in fiscal year 2011, to elect continued federal foster-care assistance for eligible young adults beyond eighteen, up to age twenty-one.

Participation was subject to educational, training, employment, or other statutory conditions.

States were not required to adopt every available extension.

The law also strengthened educational-stability requirements and required a personalized transition plan for young people approaching the point at which they would leave foster care because of age.

That planning requirement addressed housing, health insurance, education, continuing support, mentoring opportunities, and employment.

It was an acknowledgment that adulthood required a coordinated transition rather than a single administrative discharge.

But the distinction between planning and delivery remained.

A transition plan could identify housing without creating an available apartment.

It could identify a college without supplying the resources required to attend.

It could list employment services without producing a stable job.

And it could identify potential mentors without guaranteeing a dependable adult relationship.

The plan was a mechanism for organizing responsibility.

Its effectiveness depended on what could be delivered after the plan was written.

The creation of a national measurement system also came late in this period.

A federal rule published in February 2008 established the National Youth in Transition Database, requiring states to report information about independent-living services and specified outcomes for young people in foster care.

Data collection began on October 1, 2010, following the compliance deadline established by the federal rule (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2008).

The timing matters.

More than a decade after the Chafee program had been established, the federal government was beginning systematic national data collection designed to connect transition services with later outcomes.

The new system represented an important improvement in accountability.

It also demonstrated how long the distance between program authorization and comparable outcome measurement had remained.

By the end of Pax Academia, the institutional landscape had changed considerably.

Federal transition funding had expanded.

Dedicated education vouchers existed.

Financial-aid rules had been modified.

Universities were developing comprehensive support programs.

States had a new option to extend foster-care assistance into early adulthood.

Transition planning and national outcome reporting had received new statutory and administrative attention.

This was not a history of total neglect.

Nor was it evidence that none of the interventions worked.

The record shows a growing public response to a recognized developmental problem.

But it also shows that the components of that response remained distributed across separate institutions, funding streams, eligibility conditions, and administrative systems.

Child welfare could prepare a young person for independence.

A state could offer financial assistance.

A college could provide academic support.

A housing program could establish separate eligibility.

A workforce program could offer training.

Each could perform its assigned responsibility.

Yet the young person still had to move among them.

And the transition did not necessarily become continuous merely because the individual programs existed.

This is the institutional problem at the center of *Invisible*.

A public system can recognize a need without assigning durable responsibility for the outcome.

It can expand assistance while leaving important gaps in reach.

It can create an entitlement or benefit whose practical use depends on other resources that are not guaranteed.

It can measure participants without fully accounting for those who never enter the program.

The legislative history of Pax Academia does not establish that every institution failed.

It establishes that the United States had begun constructing a network of transition assistance without ensuring that its individual parts operated as one dependable developmental pathway.

That raises the next question.

If institutions measure the young people they serve, what happens to the young people they never reach?

And when success is reported, whose success is being counted?

5. The Missing Denominator

An institution can report success without establishing how much of the underlying problem it has solved.

This is not necessarily dishonesty.

It is a consequence of what institutions are organized to measure.

A college measures the students who enroll.

A financial-aid program measures the individuals who receive assistance.

A housing program measures the households it serves.

A child-welfare agency measures children and young people within its administrative responsibility.

Each institution can produce valid statistics about its own population.

But those populations are not identical.

And the differences between them become consequential when the public objective extends beyond any one institution's responsibilities.

For young people with foster-care experience, the transition into adulthood may involve several distinct populations.

The young people who have experienced foster care.

Those who satisfy the eligibility requirements for particular benefits.

Those who are informed of the benefits available to them.

Those who apply.

Those who receive assistance.

Those who enter postsecondary education.

Those who remain enrolled long enough to complete a credential.

And those who ultimately establish durable forms of economic independence.

These categories are related, but they are not interchangeable or necessarily sequential.

A young person may enter college without receiving a specialized foster-youth benefit. Another may receive transition assistance without pursuing higher education. Someone may qualify for several programs while participating in only one.

Nevertheless, each institutional measure describes a narrower or different part of the population than the broad developmental question addressed by this paper.

The distinction is the **missing denominator**.

The term does not mean that every young person is absent from government records or that all existing statistics are invalid.

It describes the difficulty of establishing outcomes for the full population against which a public commitment should ultimately be evaluated.

If a program reports that 80 percent of its participants remain enrolled, the result may be encouraging.

But it does not establish what proportion of all young people with foster-care experience entered the program, how many never reached college, or whether the intervention improved outcomes relative to what would have happened without it.

The numerator may be correct.

The denominator may be correct for the program's stated measure.

The measure may still be insufficient for evaluating the larger public system.

This distinction was visible during Pax Academia.

In 2004, the Government Accountability Office examined states' implementation of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

Among forty states providing sufficient information, approximately 56,000 young people in foster care received independent-living services in 2003.

That represented an estimated 44 percent of the eligible youth population in those states (Government Accountability Office, 2004).

The proportion varied widely across reporting states.

Some reported serving nearly all eligible young people.

Others reported serving only a small minority.

These figures required interpretation. The eligible population was estimated using state-reported age criteria and foster-care administrative counts. The calculation excluded services provided to young people who had already left care, and differences in state practices limited direct comparisons.

The 44 percent estimate therefore did not establish the exact proportion of every potentially eligible young person who received meaningful transition support.

But it exposed an important distinction between program authorization and population coverage.

The federal program existed.

States administered services.

Thousands of young people received assistance.

Yet the reporting available to investigators did not demonstrate that the assistance reached everyone within the relevant population.

The program could be substantial without being comprehensive.

GAO also found that inconsistent reporting and monitoring limited federal officials' ability to evaluate whether services improved adult outcomes.

The problem had two parts.

Institutions needed to know who received assistance.

They also needed to know whether the assistance changed what happened afterward.

Neither measure could fully substitute for the other.

An institution could increase the number of people served without demonstrating improved outcomes.

It could improve outcomes among participants without establishing whether the larger population was benefiting.

And it could create an effective service whose reach remained limited by eligibility, geography, staffing, awareness, or administrative barriers.

The measurement problem therefore emerged from the structure of the public response itself.

Programs were built around services.

The public objective concerned lives.

The distinction becomes more visible when educational outcomes are followed from an original population rather than measured only after college enrollment.

The Texas cohort introduced in Section 2 provides a useful example of how the population being measured changes across an educational pathway.

In a landscape analysis funded by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Watt and colleagues examined linked child-welfare and higher-education records. Among an identified cohort of 11,251 young people with foster-care experience who turned eighteen in 2019, 2,794 enrolled in higher education between 2019 and 2023. During the four-year observation period, 542 obtained a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or vocational certificate (Watt et al., 2025).

The resulting percentages depend on the population used as the denominator.

Among those who entered higher education, approximately 19.4 percent obtained a credential during the observed period.

Across the original cohort, credential attainment was approximately 4.8 percent.

Both measures are valid. They answer different questions.

The first concerns attainment among young people who reached postsecondary education. The second concerns attainment across the wider population identified through the study's administrative records.

Neither represents a national lifetime graduation rate. The cohort included young people with foster-care experience rather than exclusively those who aged out while still in care, and the observation period does not capture credentials earned afterward.

The study also cannot establish why approximately three-quarters of the original cohort did not enter higher education during the specified period. Some young people may have pursued employment, training, military service, caregiving, or other objectives. Others may have delayed enrollment or encountered barriers to entry.

Nonenrollment should not automatically be treated as individual failure or attributed to inadequate institutional coordination.

Nevertheless, the difference between the denominators remains consequential.

A college can measure completion among students who enroll. A specialized support program can measure outcomes among participants. Neither measure, by itself, describes the educational trajectory of the broader population.

The largest numerical narrowing in the observed Texas pathway occurred before college enrollment.

That does not establish the cause of the narrowing.

It establishes why population-level accountability cannot be replaced by program-level outcomes.

A university can improve the outcomes of students who reach its campus.

It cannot measure the entire educational trajectory of young people who never enroll.

That population lies outside its institutional denominator.

The same distinction applies to programs intended to reduce the costs of college.

Texas offers a tuition-and-fee waiver for eligible students with foster-care experience attending qualifying public institutions of higher education.

An earlier study by Watt and Faulkner examined a cohort of 4,263 young people with foster-care experience who turned eighteen during fiscal year 2010. Approximately 35.9 percent entered higher education within six years. Among those who enrolled, approximately 47 percent were eligible for the tuition waiver.

Of the enrolled students who qualified, approximately 40 percent did not use it (Watt & Faulkner, 2020).

The researchers also found that waiver users were approximately 3.5 times as likely to obtain a bachelor's degree within the observation period as eligible students who did not use the benefit.

That association is important, but it does not establish that waiver utilization independently caused the difference in graduation outcomes. Students who activated the benefit may have differed from nonusers in academic preparation, access to guidance, institutional engagement, or other characteristics affecting completion.

The 2025 Texas landscape analysis revisited these findings and documented practical obstacles reported by students with foster-care experience, including limited awareness of available benefits, confusion about eligibility, and administrative difficulties obtaining the verification necessary to activate the waiver (Watt et al., 2025).

These findings concern a different cohort from the 2019 population examined earlier in this section. Their percentages should not be combined into a single educational progression.

Nevertheless, the earlier study demonstrates an important institutional distinction.

A young person could enter higher education, satisfy the requirements for a public benefit, and still not receive it.

The benefit existed.

The student qualified.

The assistance was not necessarily realized.

This is a documented gap between formal eligibility and actual utilization. It does not establish that every eligible nonuser was prevented from using the waiver, or that improved administration would independently resolve the broader educational disparity.

But it demonstrates why the existence of a benefit is an incomplete measure of the assistance delivered to the population it was intended to serve.

California provides another perspective through the NextUp program, which offers academic, financial, housing-related, and other assistance to eligible community-college students with foster-care experience.

The program expanded across California's 115 community colleges and reported serving 5,007 students during the 2023–2024 academic year. Of those participants, 4,785 had credit enrollment during the reporting period (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2025).

The program's legislative report also documented fall-to-spring persistence.

Using a separate administrative data extract, the Chancellor's Office identified 3,635 NextUp students who took courses during the fall term. Of those students, 2,887 persisted into the spring term, representing approximately 79 percent of the fall-term population.

That is a meaningful measure of continued educational participation.

It is also a specific measure with a defined denominator.

The 79 percent figure does not represent persistence among every young person with foster-care experience in California. Nor does it establish what proportion of eligible community-college students participated in NextUp.

It describes persistence among identified fall-term students already participating in the program.

The same report recorded 148 students transferring to four-year institutions during 2023–2024. An additional measure identified 411 students satisfying the California Community Colleges' Vision Goal completion definition, which includes approved certificates, associate degrees, and community-college bachelor's degrees.

These figures describe annual outcomes rather than the eventual attainment of a fixed entering cohort.

Students participating during a particular academic year may have begun their education at different times, accumulated different amounts of coursework, and entered the program at different stages of their educational pathways.

The report also acknowledges small differences between its administrative headcounts because the underlying data were extracted at different times.

Consequently, dividing annual completions by annual program participation would not establish a longitudinal graduation rate.

Nor do the reported outcomes independently establish the causal effect of NextUp. The figures describe educational progress among participants without determining what those same students would have achieved in the absence of the program.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the assistance delivered or the accomplishments documented.

They clarify what the measurements establish.

NextUp can report meaningful persistence, transfers, and credential attainment among participating students while the broader educational outcomes of the foster-experienced population remain a separate question.

The distinction is not between a successful program and an unsuccessful one.

It is between the outcomes measured within a program and the larger population-level objective that motivated the program's creation.

An implementation study conducted by the Urban Institute in 2024 reinforces the distinction.

Researchers examining NextUp found that participating students frequently valued the program's financial assistance, individualized guidance, and other supports.

They also found substantial variation in how campuses implemented the program.

Program staff often defined success through immediate student needs, including retention, progress through coursework, and successful connection with services, rather than graduation alone (Tucker et al., 2024).

That perspective is reasonable.

A student obtaining emergency housing, continuing enrollment, or resolving an immediate financial crisis may have achieved something important even without earning a credential during that year.

But it also complicates evaluation.

If programs define success through different outcomes, time horizons, and populations, their reported accomplishments cannot automatically be combined into one measure of system effectiveness.

The problem is not that immediate outcomes should be ignored.

It is that immediate outcomes and long-term outcomes answer different questions.

An effective evaluation needs both.

The federal government has made substantial progress toward more consistent outcome measurement through the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD).

NYTD contains two distinct reporting components. The services component documents qualifying independent-living assistance provided to young people, while the outcomes component surveys selected age-based cohorts about their circumstances as they transition toward adulthood.

The distinction matters because the populations represented by these records are not identical.

For the cohort first surveyed at age seventeen in federal fiscal year 2020, the Children's Bureau reported 21,402 young people eligible for the baseline survey. Of those, 14,768 participated, representing approximately 69 percent of the eligible population.

The same cohort was followed at ages nineteen and twenty-one. In 2022, 8,091 of 10,839 eligible young people participated in the age-nineteen follow-up, approximately 75 percent. In 2024, 7,339 of 10,682 eligible young people participated in the age-twenty-one follow-up, approximately 69 percent (Children's Bureau, 2025).

These figures do not represent three successive measurements of one unchanged denominator.

The original baseline population included young people meeting the NYTD foster-care and age requirements. Follow-up eligibility depended on participation in the baseline survey, sampling decisions in participating states, and other applicable eligibility conditions.

The smaller follow-up populations therefore cannot be interpreted simply as young people who disappeared from institutional records.

Nevertheless, nonresponse presents an important limitation.

At age twenty-one, the Children's Bureau classified 2,340 eligible young people as unable to locate. Others declined participation or did not respond for different reasons.

An individual who cannot be contacted has not necessarily experienced an unsuccessful transition. The survey has not established that person's educational, employment, housing, or other adult circumstances.

At the same time, the outcomes reported by participants cannot automatically be assumed to describe everyone who was eligible. Young people who respond may differ from those who do not.

The Children's Bureau explicitly cautioned that the national outcome results had not been weighted for potential nonresponse bias and should be considered preliminary.

The distinction is consequential.

NYTD represents a substantial improvement in the federal government's ability to examine transitions from foster care. But the existence of a national reporting system does not eliminate the methodological difference between the population originally identified, the population eligible for follow-up, and the population whose outcomes were successfully observed.

A public institution can possess records of a young person's earlier participation without possessing equally reliable information about that person's later circumstances.

That is a limitation of the available evidence, not proof that the individual failed.

That limitation is particularly significant for a developmental transition that crosses several institutional systems.

A young person may leave foster care.

Enter employment.

Attend a community college.

Transfer to another institution.

Interrupt education.

Move between residences.

Receive public assistance.

Resume coursework.

And eventually complete a credential or establish a career through a different pathway.

The full trajectory does not necessarily belong to any one administrative system.

Child welfare may record the exit from care.

A college may record enrollment and academic progress.

A housing program may record assistance during a period of instability.

A workforce agency may record training.

An employer may report wages.

Each institution holds part of the record.

The developmental outcome extends across them.

This is the difference between **program accountability and population accountability**.

Program accountability asks whether an institution carried out its assigned activities and achieved the outcomes it was responsible for measuring.

Population accountability asks what happened to the broader group whose development motivated those activities in the first place.

The two forms of accountability should complement one another.

An individual program should not be held responsible for every later outcome in a young person's life.

A college cannot guarantee employment.

A housing program cannot guarantee a degree.

A child-welfare agency cannot determine every decision a former participant makes as an adult.

Young adults possess agency, and no public system should attempt to eliminate uncertainty from their lives through permanent supervision.

But a system composed of multiple institutions still needs some way to evaluate whether those institutions collectively create a dependable transition.

Otherwise, the success of each component can become disconnected from the success of the larger arrangement.

The question is not whether every young person follows the same educational or employment pathway.

It is whether the public system can distinguish among several different outcomes:

A young person who chooses a pathway other than college.

A young person who wants college but cannot enter.

A student who enters without receiving available support.

A student who receives support but cannot remain enrolled.

A student who transfers or pauses education and later returns.

A young person who establishes economic independence without a degree.

And a young person whose circumstances remain unknown to the institutions that previously served them.

These are not equivalent cases.

They should not disappear into a single measure of completion, noncompletion, service use, or nonparticipation.

A more complete evaluation would begin with a clearly defined population and observation date.

It would retain that population as a reference point while measuring changing eligibility, participation, educational progress, housing circumstances, employment, and other adult outcomes over time.

It would report outcomes among program participants and among the wider population separately.

It would identify missing observations rather than silently treating them as success or failure.

And it would distinguish descriptive improvement from the causal effect of a particular intervention.

Such a system would not require every young person to accept the same services.

It would require institutions to understand what their services were reaching, what outcomes followed, and where the available evidence ended.

The distinction also has an economic consequence.

A benefit-cost analysis cannot establish the return to a broad population merely by calculating the return among successful program participants.

Participants may differ from those who never enroll.

Completers may differ from those who leave early.

A program may impose costs on many participants while generating substantial measured gains among only some of them.

Conversely, an effective intervention might produce significant gains by reaching people who would otherwise never have entered the educational system.

The economic result depends partly on who is included in the calculation.

An evaluation that begins only with program completers may overstate the return available from expanding the program.

An evaluation that counts only direct educational credentials may omit meaningful benefits in housing stability, employment, health, and independent living.

Both errors can distort public decisions.

The missing denominator is therefore not only a reporting problem.

It can become a funding problem.

An institution evaluated primarily through the success of participating students may have stronger incentives to improve outcomes inside its program than to reach people outside it.

That does not demonstrate deliberate exclusion.

It identifies a possible misalignment between the population an institution can measure and the population a public policy ultimately intends to assist.

The institutional solution cannot be to abandon local accountability.

Colleges, housing organizations, child-welfare agencies, and workforce programs need measures suited to their actual responsibilities.

But their measures must be connected to a wider understanding of the transition.

Otherwise, the public system may know what each program accomplished without knowing whether the overall arrangement has become more effective.

This is the deeper meaning of the missing denominator.

The children were counted while they were in care.

Some were counted again when they received transition services.

Others appeared in college enrollment statistics, housing-program records, or workforce data.

But those systems did not necessarily preserve one continuous view of the population as it moved from childhood into adulthood.

The problem is not that no data exist.

It is that different institutions may describe different pieces of a transition without demonstrating how those pieces fit together.

That limits the ability to identify where assistance was unavailable, where it was not used, where it failed to sustain progress, and where young people succeeded through pathways the original policy did not anticipate.

It also makes it difficult to assign responsibility for the spaces between institutions.

A person can leave one system successfully without entering the next one successfully.

The exit is recorded.

The interrupted transition may not be.

For the young person, however, the transition remains one continuous experience.

Public systems do not merely divide responsibility across organizations.

They also divide it across age limits, enrollment conditions, eligibility periods, funding categories, and administrative exits.

A young person can reach the end of one institution’s responsibility before reaching the beginning of another institution’s effective support.

The problem is therefore not only who is counted.

It is what happens when the institution doing the counting is no longer responsible for what comes next.

6. A System of Exits

Adulthood is a developmental transition.

Public institutions often treat it as an administrative event.

The difference matters.

A young person may become legally an adult at eighteen without possessing the income, housing, education, relationships, or practical experience necessary to live independently.

The law can recognize adulthood immediately.

Economic independence usually develops over time.

For many young adults, that difference is accommodated through family relationships, continued household support, educational enrollment, and gradual changes in responsibility.

For young people leaving foster care, the difference can be organized through a series of institutional exits.

The end of a foster-care placement.

The termination of court supervision.

The conclusion of eligibility for a housing program.

The expiration of a financial benefit.

The end of an academic term.

The completion of an educational credential.

The loss of contact with a caseworker.

Each event can be reasonable within the institution responsible for it.

But the young person does not experience adulthood as a collection of separate administrative systems.

Housing, education, employment, transportation, healthcare, and financial stability remain connected.

An interruption in one can change the conditions under which the others remain possible.

This paper refers to that arrangement as **a system of exits**.

The term does not imply that all public programs terminate at eighteen, that every foster-experienced young person loses assistance, or that existing transitions are uniformly unsuccessful.

It describes a structure in which different forms of support are governed by different conditions for entry, continuation, and exit.

The resulting boundaries do not necessarily correspond to the young person's developmental circumstances.

That mismatch was especially consequential during Pax Academia.

In much of the United States, young people who remained in foster care into late adolescence could leave formal care when they reached eighteen.

There were exceptions, including state provisions allowing continued care or supervision under particular circumstances.

But the transition remained shaped by legal age thresholds and administrative responsibility.

The consequences were documented near the end of the historical period.

In May 2010, Human Rights Watch published *My So-Called Emancipation*, an investigation of homelessness among young people leaving California foster care.

The report described young adults who left care without adequate housing, income, or the relationships necessary to establish stable living arrangements.

In California, courts could retain jurisdiction beyond eighteen under certain circumstances, but routine practice and federal funding arrangements limited the practical availability of continued foster care.

The report documented young people leaving foster homes or group facilities for emergency shelters, temporary accommodation, and other unstable circumstances.

It also found that some transitions into homelessness occurred after an initial housing arrangement failed rather than immediately upon emancipation (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The distinction is important.

The end of formal care could be followed by temporary stability.

That stability did not necessarily establish independence.

A young person might stay with a friend, return to relatives, rent a room, or enter transitional accommodation.

Each arrangement could provide time.

But when it ended, the young person might still lack the income or support needed to secure another.

An administrative transition could be complete while the developmental transition remained unfinished.

The 2010 investigation was not a representative survey of all young people leaving California foster care. Its interview sample concentrated on young people who had experienced homelessness.

It cannot establish the rate at which emancipation produced homelessness across the entire population.

But it documents a concrete institutional problem.

The system could reach the lawful end of its responsibility without ensuring that the young person possessed a durable alternative.

That problem cannot be resolved merely by requiring better preparation before exit.

Preparation is valuable.

Young people should have opportunities to develop budgeting skills, understand employment expectations, manage transportation, complete education, and participate in decisions about their future.

But knowing how to obtain housing is not identical to being able to afford housing.

Understanding financial aid does not establish that sufficient aid exists.

Knowing how to apply for employment does not guarantee that an employer will hire.

The transition requires both capability and opportunity.

An institution can teach a young person what independence requires without supplying the conditions in which those skills can be exercised.

This is the limitation of treating emancipation as the conclusion of a preparation process.

A young person may have received training.

The surrounding circumstances may still make independence difficult.

The distinction was recognized by federal policymakers.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 allowed states, beginning in fiscal year 2011, to claim federal foster-care reimbursement for eligible young adults beyond eighteen, up to age twenty-one.

States could elect to provide extended care under specified conditions.

The legislation also required youth-directed transition planning during the period preceding an age-related exit from foster care.

That requirement addressed housing, education, employment, healthcare, continuing support, and mentoring.

These were meaningful reforms.

They recognized that turning eighteen did not necessarily coincide with readiness for independent adulthood.

But they did not establish one national age of exit.

The extension was a state option.

It was also conditional on participation in education, employment, training, activities designed to remove employment barriers, or an applicable medical limitation.

The federal framework therefore expanded the period during which assistance could continue without eliminating the distinction between eligible participation and independent adulthood.

It also created a different institutional question.

What should happen when a young adult needs support but no longer fits the conditions under which the support is authorized?

The participation requirements associated with extended care are not arbitrary.

They are designed to connect continued public assistance with activities that can improve future independence.

A young adult completing high school may need additional time.

A college student may require continued housing and financial support.

A person entering employment may benefit from assistance while income becomes stable.

Someone facing barriers to employment may need services before work becomes possible.

The federal criteria explicitly recognize these different circumstances, including the inability to meet ordinary participation conditions because of a medical condition.

The design is therefore broader than a simple requirement to remain enrolled in school or maintain a job.

But the administrative framework still creates a boundary around the support.

A young adult must qualify for continued participation, and the responsible agency must establish that the relevant requirements are met.

That arrangement raises a question about how the system handles instability.

Educational progress is not always continuous.

Employment can be intermittent.

Housing difficulties may interfere with attendance.

Health conditions may change.

A young adult may leave an unsuitable program, experience a crisis, or need time to determine a different direction.

These are ordinary possibilities in the transition to adulthood.

For someone with dependable family reserve capacity, a temporary interruption may not eliminate the resources needed to recover.

For someone whose essential support is attached to program participation, an interruption may also create administrative uncertainty.

The concern is not that participation conditions necessarily cause instability.

It is that support intended to enable development must remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate the interruptions that development itself can involve.

California provides a particularly useful example of how policymakers attempted to address that problem.

Assembly Bill 12, enacted in September 2010 and implemented beginning in January 2012, created the state's extended foster-care framework.

The program eventually allowed eligible young adults to remain in care until their twenty-first birthday.

Participants became known as nonminor dependents.

That status recognized that they were legally adults while permitting continued foster-care assistance, case management, financial support, and approved living arrangements.

The law did not require every eligible young adult to remain in care.

Participation was voluntary.

Young adults could leave the program.

Importantly, they could also seek to reenter before reaching the applicable age limit, provided they satisfied the relevant requirements (California Department of Social Services, n.d.-a).

Reentry represented an important change in the logic of transition.

Leaving care no longer had to be an irreversible decision made at eighteen.

A young adult could attempt independence, discover that additional support was necessary, and return to the extended-care arrangement.

This brought the public system closer to a function often supplied informally by families.

The ability to try independence without making the first attempt final.

But reentry did not eliminate every boundary.

It operated within the age and eligibility limits of extended care.

It also required renewed administrative contact and participation in the procedures necessary to regain support.

The arrangement acknowledged the need for a second opportunity.

It did not make that opportunity indefinite.

California's extended-care framework also requires a distinction between legal adulthood and continued institutional involvement.

A nonminor dependent is legally an adult. Under California Welfare and Institutions Code Section 303, participation in extended foster care does not ordinarily place that adult under the legal custody of a county child-welfare or probation department. The young adult retains legal decision-making authority, although particular limitations may apply under delinquency jurisdiction (California Welfare and Institutions Code § 303(d); California Rules of Court, rule 5.900(c)(1)–(2)).

At the same time, participation in extended foster care ordinarily involves continuing juvenile court jurisdiction, agency responsibility, an agreed transition plan, and eligibility requirements (California Rules of Court, rule 5.900(b)(1)–(2)). The arrangement preserves important financial and practical assistance while maintaining an organized relationship with the foster-care system.

California therefore demonstrates that adult autonomy and continuing foster-care assistance are not inherently incompatible.

The remaining question is different.

Can appropriate assistance remain accessible after the young adult no longer participates in that institutional arrangement, including when an ordinary disruption occurs beyond the age or eligibility boundaries of extended care?

That is the distinction between extending foster care into adulthood and establishing continuity of assistance beyond foster-care participation.

California's model therefore demonstrates both institutional progress and the remaining design problem.

An exit can become reversible.

The conditions governing that reversal can still constrain when and how assistance resumes.

The distinction matters because developmental recovery does not follow a fixed timetable.

A young adult may be ready to leave care at nineteen but experience a serious disruption at twenty-two.

Another may remain in extended care until twenty-one and still need time to finish college or establish financial stability.

The legal system must establish limits.

But the developmental outcome cannot be inferred simply from reaching them.

California also illustrates how housing assistance can remain divided by administrative status even when the underlying need continues.

The Transitional Housing Placement Program for Nonminor Dependents (THP-NMD) provides supervised transitional housing for eligible young adults participating in California's extended foster-care system. The program serves nonminor dependents who are generally eighteen through twenty years old and remain eligible for extended care.

THP-NMD combines housing with case management, independent-living preparation, and assistance related to education and employment. Participants remain legally adults, but their housing placement operates within the extended foster-care framework, including its eligibility and participation requirements (California Department of Social Services, n.d.-b).

California also operates the Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus), which serves eligible former foster youth who exited care on or after their eighteenth birthday.

Unlike THP-NMD, THP-Plus does not require continued participation in extended foster care. It provides a separate pathway to transitional housing and supportive services after the original foster-care relationship has ended.

Under California Welfare and Institutions Code § 11403.2(a)(2), THP-Plus assistance may extend for as many as thirty-six cumulative months, whether consecutive or nonconsecutive, for eligible former foster youth aged eighteen through twenty-four. Eligibility ends upon reaching the twenty-fifth birthday. Actual availability and duration can depend on county program arrangements and applicable participation requirements (California Department of Social Services, n.d.-b; California Welfare and Institutions Code § 11403.2).

These programs represent meaningful institutional progress.

California has recognized that housing assistance may be necessary both while a young adult remains in extended foster care and after that participation ends.

But the two programs are not administratively identical.

THP-NMD operates as an approved extended foster-care placement. THP-Plus is a separate post-care housing arrangement with its own eligibility conditions, service providers, and participation requirements.

A young adult leaving extended care may qualify for THP-Plus, but the existence of that program does not independently establish that housing will be available at the moment of transition.

Access can depend on eligibility determination, referral, local program capacity, and the arrangements available through the relevant county.

Nor does completion of a time-limited housing program establish that the young adult will necessarily possess sufficient income or access to affordable housing afterward.

These are not findings that California's transitional housing programs generally fail to coordinate. The evidence examined here does not establish the rate at which young adults encounter unsuccessful transitions between them.

The distinction is institutional.

California has developed housing-support arrangements on both sides of the formal foster-care exit. The remaining question is whether the young adult can move between those arrangements without experiencing an avoidable interruption in assistance.

The problem is therefore not simply a shortage of program categories.

It is whether separate programs can provide dependable continuity when the young person's legal status, eligibility, or circumstances change.

Housing assistance also exists through federal programs administered outside the child-welfare system.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Family Unification Program provides housing-choice vouchers to certain families and young people affected by foster care.

The youth component serves eligible individuals aged eighteen through twenty-four who have left, or are approaching departure from, foster care and who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.).

Unlike the family component, youth vouchers are time-limited.

Under the current federal framework, youth assistance ordinarily extends for up to thirty-six months. The Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities amendments, enacted on December 27, 2020, as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, permit qualifying participants who first leased a unit after that date to receive up to twenty-four additional months of assistance, subject to applicable requirements.

The extension provisions recognize that establishing stable housing and economic independence may require more than three years. But they do not create an unconditional entitlement to five years of assistance.

The program also illustrates the administrative coordination required to make housing support available.

Public child-welfare agencies identify and refer potentially eligible young people. Public housing authorities determine eligibility for housing-choice vouchers and administer rental assistance. Child-welfare agencies must also provide or arrange designated supportive services for participating youth under applicable program requirements.

These are complementary responsibilities.

But the stages of assistance remain distinct.

A young person can be eligible for referral without having received a voucher.

A referral can be completed without establishing that the housing authority has issued assistance.

And receiving a voucher does not necessarily mean that the individual has secured an available rental unit.

Program capacity also matters. Family Unification Program vouchers are allocated to participating housing authorities through federal funding arrangements and are not available through every housing authority.

The relevant institutional question is therefore not only whether the young person qualifies.

It is whether the referral, eligibility determination, voucher issuance, housing search, and continuing assistance form a usable pathway.

The Family Unification Program demonstrates that public policy already recognizes the importance of housing support after foster-care participation ends.

It also demonstrates why a continuing benefit can depend on successful coordination between institutions with different responsibilities.

A young adult's need for housing remains continuous.

The administrative process for obtaining it does not necessarily operate as one continuous transaction.

The program's existence should therefore be recognized as substantial institutional progress without assuming that eligibility alone guarantees stable housing.

The issue becomes more significant when housing is necessary for participation in other programs.

A young person may need stable housing to remain in college.

College enrollment may help satisfy an extended-care participation condition.

Income from employment may eventually be required to maintain housing independently.

Transportation may be necessary to reach both work and education.

The systems are related through the person's life.

Their eligibility rules remain separately administered.

A disruption can therefore move across institutional boundaries even when no individual program has violated its rules.

Education introduces another set of institutional timelines.

Federal student-aid policy recognizes that young people with foster-care experience may not possess the parental financial relationships ordinarily assumed by the financial-aid system.

Under current federal rules, a student who was in foster care at any time since reaching age thirteen qualifies as an independent student for purposes of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). That status remains applicable even if the student's foster-care circumstances subsequently changed (U.S. Department of Education, 2026).

Independent status means that the student generally does not need to provide parental financial information when applying for federal student aid.

Where documentation of foster-care history is required, federal guidance recognizes multiple forms of verification, including official agency records, documented communications with authorized professionals, and verifiable electronic data matches.

It does not mean that the student receives unlimited financial assistance.

Nor does it establish that the student possesses the material resources necessary to attend college.

A separate form of support exists through the Chafee Education and Training Voucher program.

Under the current federal framework, eligible young people may receive vouchers of up to $5,000 annually, or the applicable cost of attendance if lower, for qualifying postsecondary education and training expenses.

The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 amended the program to permit states to extend participation until age twenty-six, while limiting an individual's receipt of vouchers to five years, whether consecutive or nonconsecutive.

Continued eligibility depends on enrollment in a qualifying educational or training program, satisfactory progress, and other applicable requirements (42 U.S.C. § 677(i)).

The voucher is therefore neither an unrestricted living allowance nor an automatic consequence of independent-student status.

The two policies address related but different institutional problems.

FAFSA independence removes an inappropriate assumption about parental financial resources.

The Education and Training Voucher program provides a separate, limited source of financial assistance for eligible young people.

A student may qualify as independent for federal financial aid while having no remaining eligibility for a Chafee voucher.

Another student may qualify for both forms of assistance but still need to complete separate administrative requirements to receive them.

These distinctions become particularly important when education is interrupted.

One young person may enter a four-year institution at eighteen and complete a bachelor's degree before twenty-two.

Another may begin at community college, attend part-time while working, interrupt enrollment because of housing or employment difficulties, and return several years later.

Both may be pursuing legitimate educational objectives.

But their different timelines can interact differently with program eligibility, satisfactory-progress requirements, and the expiration of specialized assistance.

The allowance for nonconsecutive voucher years recognizes that education does not always follow an uninterrupted sequence.

Nevertheless, the five-year participation limit and age boundary remain consequential.

A student can remain capable of completing a credential after a particular assistance program has ended.

The educational objective may continue.

The dedicated funding may not.

This does not establish that every student should receive unlimited educational assistance, or that all delayed completion results from institutional fragmentation.

It establishes that educational duration and assistance duration are separate quantities.

A system seeking to support educational attainment must therefore distinguish the student's continuing educational objective from the eligibility periods governing the assistance intended to make that objective attainable.

The same distinction appears in healthcare.

The Affordable Care Act established a mandatory Medicaid eligibility pathway for qualifying young adults who aged out of foster care, effective January 1, 2014.

The Former Foster Care Children eligibility group allows qualifying individuals to receive Medicaid coverage while under age twenty-six, without an income or resource test.

Eligibility generally requires foster-care status at age eighteen or a later qualifying exit age, together with qualifying Medicaid enrollment. Under federal rules, states may elect to recognize enrollment at any point during the foster-care period from which the person aged out (42 U.S.C. § 1396a(a)(10)(A)(i)(IX); Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2022).

The provision created an important protection.

Healthcare coverage no longer needed to terminate simply because formal foster-care supervision ended.

A young adult might leave extended care at twenty-one while retaining eligibility for Medicaid until twenty-six.

But the eligibility category is not a universal guarantee for everyone who has experienced foster care.

A young person who left foster care before reaching the qualifying age does not ordinarily become eligible through this particular category solely because of an earlier placement.

Other Medicaid eligibility pathways may remain available.

The distinction is relevant when compared with the federal financial-aid rules.

FAFSA independence can recognize foster-care experience occurring at any time since age thirteen.

The Former Foster Care Children Medicaid category uses a different threshold: foster-care status at the relevant age of transition and Medicaid enrollment during the qualifying foster-care period.

Both provisions recognize circumstances associated with foster-care experience.

They do not recognize precisely the same population.

The Medicaid pathway also developed through a separate sequence of reforms.

Under the original Affordable Care Act framework, mandatory coverage through this category generally required the young person to have aged out of foster care in the state where Medicaid coverage was being sought.

The SUPPORT Act of 2018 amended that arrangement.

Effective January 1, 2023, states became required to recognize qualifying foster-care and Medicaid enrollment histories from other states for individuals who turned eighteen on or after that date.

The reform did not retroactively extend the same federal requirement to everyone who had previously aged out of care.

Older cohorts remained subject to the original federal eligibility conditions, although some states obtained federal approval to provide broader coverage (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2022).

This historical distinction matters.

The geographic restriction was not simply an administrative inconvenience.

It was a boundary within the eligibility structure itself.

The 2023 change reduced that boundary for younger cohorts.

But removing a legal restriction does not automatically eliminate the practical work required to obtain and maintain coverage.

An eligible young adult who relocates may still need to establish residency, complete an application, or have prior foster-care and Medicaid participation verified.

Coverage can also depend on successfully navigating renewal procedures and responding to communications from the administering agency.

In February 2025, the Government Accountability Office examined Medicaid enrollment among individuals formerly in foster care.

GAO identified at least 112,000 individuals enrolled in the Former Foster Care Children Medicaid eligibility group for at least one month during 2023, based on reliable data from forty-six states and the District of Columbia. Four states were excluded because of data-quality concerns, and New York's figures did not include New York City.

The investigation also identified obstacles to enrollment and continued coverage.

Frequent changes of address could prevent young people from receiving official communications.

Some lacked documentation or reliable access to the technology required to complete administrative procedures.

Others encountered difficulties involving coordination between agencies, limited staff familiarity with the eligibility category, or mistrust of institutions associated with their earlier care.

The states examined by GAO reported approaches that included simplified enrollment and renewal procedures, text messaging, specialized staff, and partnerships with trusted organizations (Government Accountability Office, 2025b).

These findings do not establish that every eligible former foster youth experiences a coverage interruption.

Nor does the enrollment figure establish the proportion of all eligible individuals who successfully obtained coverage.

The evidence identifies a more specific institutional problem.

A person may satisfy the legal conditions for assistance while encountering obstacles to receiving or retaining that assistance.

The eligibility rule can be correct.

The administrative process can still be difficult to navigate.

That distinction does not diminish the importance of the underlying protection.

It identifies a separate responsibility.

Extending eligibility determines who may receive assistance.

Maintaining effective access determines whether that assistance can remain available through ordinary changes in the young person's circumstances.

It also shows that later reforms have not been limited to expanding benefit levels or extending age limits.

Some have attempted to reduce the burden of maintaining access across institutional transitions.

That is a different form of continuity.

And it is one that can matter even when the underlying benefit is already established.

The larger arrangement now becomes visible.

A young adult may leave foster-care supervision at one age.

Remain eligible for some transition services at another.

Receive specialized housing assistance under a separate timetable.

Use education benefits that follow enrollment and progress rules.

And retain healthcare coverage under yet another age boundary.

None of those differences necessarily represents a policy error.

Different services have different objectives, costs, and eligibility requirements.

Education assistance may reasonably depend on educational participation.

Housing assistance may be targeted toward those with demonstrated housing needs.

Healthcare coverage may continue without an employment requirement because its underlying purpose is different.

The difficulty arises when the public system assumes that the existence of these separate pathways is equivalent to a continuous developmental arrangement.

It is not.

The programs may collectively provide substantial assistance.

But their individual rules do not automatically establish who is responsible for helping the young person navigate the transitions between them.

Nor do they establish that every young person will possess the same combination of support.

The distinction becomes especially important for young adults whose lives do not follow the sequence institutions anticipate.

A student may leave college before establishing a stable career.

A worker may lose employment while still paying rent.

A young adult may move across state lines to pursue an opportunity.

A housing arrangement may end before a training program produces sufficient income.

An individual may not realize that an existing benefit remains available after another program has ended.

These are possibilities rather than evidence that every transition results in lost assistance.

But a dependable transition system must be designed to handle foreseeable interruptions, not only uninterrupted progress.

This suggests that the most important institutional distinction is not between support and independence.

It is between **support that requires continued administrative attachment and support that remains accessible as a young adult becomes independent**.

Extended foster care can provide significant material stability.

But it also maintains an organized relationship with the child-welfare system, including case management, participation requirements, and other forms of oversight.

That relationship can be valuable and voluntarily chosen.

It may not be the form of assistance every young adult wants or needs.

Some people may wish to leave state supervision while retaining access to housing assistance, educational guidance, healthcare, or occasional emergency support.

Others may benefit from remaining in extended care.

The question should not be settled through a presumption that every young adult must remain attached to foster care for as long as assistance is available.

Nor should leaving care be treated as proof that no future help will be necessary.

The two decisions are different.

One concerns the young person's relationship to public supervision.

The other concerns the practical conditions under which independent adulthood becomes sustainable.

A system that recognizes this distinction can permit separation from formal care without treating separation as the end of every public responsibility.

Several existing policies already move in that direction.

Medicaid can continue after foster-care supervision ends.

Federal financial-aid independence can persist after the original foster-care experience.

Specialized housing programs may serve young adults who are no longer in care.

Education vouchers can remain available across interruptions in enrollment, within defined limits.

These are meaningful developments.

They show that public policy has increasingly recognized the need to separate adult autonomy from the immediate termination of support.

But the protections remain organized around different services and different eligibility systems.

The underlying developmental transition remains broader than any one program.

This is why the system of exits matters.

A young person may successfully leave foster care without possessing durable housing.

May enter college without remaining enrolled.

May qualify for benefits without receiving them.

May retain healthcare while losing other forms of practical assistance.

May establish employment without earning enough to sustain independence.

And may reach the maximum age of a program while continuing to need the capability that program was intended to help develop.

Each outcome must be evaluated on its own terms.

Leaving foster care is not inherently a failure.

Leaving college is not always a failure.

Receiving public assistance is not inherently evidence of unsuccessful adulthood.

Nor does earning a degree establish that every other dimension of independence has been secured.

The problem is treating an institutional endpoint as a sufficient measure of developmental progress.

The formal system can close a case.

The young person's life continues.

The central question is whether the institutions responsible for supporting that transition have created enough continuity that an ordinary interruption does not become an irreversible loss of opportunity.

That question returns the investigation to higher education.

Foster-experienced students do not enter one uniform postsecondary system.

They enter community colleges, universities, certificate programs, trade schools, and other institutions with different resources, academic requirements, housing arrangements, and student-support capacities.

Some begin at one institution and attempt to move to another.

Every transition introduces another potential boundary.

Admission does not guarantee completion.

Completion of individual courses does not guarantee transfer.

A successful transfer does not guarantee that every accumulated credit will advance the student toward a degree.

And access to support at one institution does not establish that equivalent assistance will be available at the next.

The question is no longer simply whether the student can enter higher education.

It is whether the pathway can remain usable as the student moves through it.

The public system has progressively extended assistance beyond childhood.

But an extended collection of programs is not necessarily a continuous pathway.

That distinction is the unfinished institutional problem.

And it becomes especially visible at the point where a young person must cross from one educational institution into another.

7. The Second Threshold

College admission is not the completion of an educational pathway.

It is the beginning of one.

During Pax Academia, the expansion of higher education created additional opportunities for students to enter postsecondary institutions. Community colleges played an important role in that expansion by providing relatively affordable, geographically accessible alternatives to immediate enrollment at four-year colleges and universities.

A student could begin near home.

Continue working.

Attend part-time.

Complete a certificate.

Earn an associate degree.

Or accumulate credits intended to transfer toward a bachelor's degree.

The flexibility was valuable.

But it also meant that entry into higher education did not necessarily establish a continuous route to its most economically consequential credentials.

For students seeking a bachelor's degree through community college, the educational pathway contained another institutional boundary.

The student first had to enter college.

Then progress through coursework.

Then satisfy the requirements for transfer.

Then enter another institution.

Then complete the remaining requirements for a degree.

Each stage could involve different admissions standards, academic requirements, financing arrangements, administrative procedures, and student-support systems.

This paper refers to the transition from initial postsecondary access toward a subsequent institution or credential as **the second threshold**.

The term does not imply that all community-college students should transfer or that a bachelor's degree is the only legitimate educational objective.

Certificates, apprenticeships, associate degrees, technical training, and direct employment can provide meaningful routes into independent adulthood.

The second threshold concerns students whose intended educational pathway requires additional institutional progression.

For those students, admission to the first institution does not establish access to the final destination.

That distinction is particularly important for young people with foster-care experience.

Community colleges can offer practical advantages for students who are academically underprepared, financially constrained, uncertain about a major, or unable to relocate immediately.

They also create an entry point for students who cannot assume that housing, transportation, and living expenses will be supported by family resources.

But the characteristics that make community college accessible do not eliminate the conditions required for eventual completion.

They can move those conditions further along the pathway.

A student may be able to afford a community college without being able to afford a university.

May be academically prepared for introductory coursework without meeting every transfer requirement.

May have a dependable adviser at one institution without having an equivalent relationship at another.

And may receive specialized assistance that does not transfer automatically with the academic record.

The initial institution can provide access.

The next institution may require the student to establish that access again.

This is the second threshold.

The distinction becomes clearer in research on foster-experienced college students.

A Chapin Hall study examined 5,462 young people in Illinois who turned seventeen while in foster care between 2012 and 2018, using postsecondary enrollment and graduation records available through December 2020.

The researchers connected state child-welfare records with postsecondary enrollment and graduation records from the National Student Clearinghouse.

They also interviewed twenty-four students with foster-care experience who had completed at least one semester of community college, along with five community-college administrators.

Approximately 35 percent of the identified population enrolled in college.

Among those who enrolled, 86 percent attended community colleges.

Only 8 percent of the community-college students had earned a certificate or degree within the study's observation period (Havlicek, Dworsky, and Gitlow, 2021).

The figures describe an Illinois population and should not be treated as national rates.

Students entered college at different times, and some may have completed credentials after the observed period.

The results also include both certificates and degrees, rather than measuring bachelor's completion alone.

Nevertheless, the findings establish the importance of community colleges within the educational pathway of this population.

For most of the young people in this study who entered postsecondary education, the relevant institution was not a residential four-year university.

It was a community college.

That matters because the public image of college frequently assumes a particular form of participation.

A student leaves home.

Moves into a dormitory.

Attends classes on a residential campus.

Develops relationships with faculty and peers.

And advances through a degree program within a relatively continuous institutional environment.

That experience exists.

It is not the entire American higher-education system.

Community colleges frequently serve students who commute, work, provide care to family members, attend part-time, and enter or leave education as their circumstances change.

For students with limited financial reserves, that flexibility can be the reason college becomes possible.

But flexibility can also make persistence more dependent on the stability of circumstances outside the classroom.

The Illinois study documented several such difficulties.

Students interviewed by researchers described weak academic preparation, limited knowledge of financial aid, and insufficient professional guidance during the transition into higher education.

Many had encountered academic difficulties before college.

Nearly all of those interviewed had been required to complete remedial coursework.

The study also found that community-college administrators did not consistently know which students had foster-care experience and might benefit from specialized assistance.

These findings require care.

The twenty-four students interviewed were not a representative sample of every community-college student with foster-care experience.

Their experiences cannot establish the prevalence of each problem nationally.

But they identify a practical difficulty in the relationship between student needs and institutional capacity.

A college may have students who need specialized assistance without possessing a reliable means of identifying them.

The students may have an educational need.

The institution may offer academic services.

But the connection between those needs and those services may remain incomplete.

That is another example of the discontinuity examined throughout this paper.

The student has entered higher education.

The institution has begun measuring academic participation.

But the surrounding conditions required for success may not yet have been adequately established.

The problem does not end at enrollment.

It becomes more complex when the student seeks to move beyond the institution.

The transfer pathway has long been an important part of the American higher-education system.

Students can complete lower-division coursework at community colleges before entering a four-year institution.

When the arrangement works efficiently, it can reduce educational costs, provide academic flexibility, and create access to universities that students might not have entered directly.

But transfer is not merely a change of campus.

It is a negotiation between educational systems.

The receiving institution determines whether prior coursework is accepted and how those credits apply toward its own degree requirements.

Those are related but different questions.

A university may recognize that a student completed a course without allowing that course to satisfy a particular major requirement.

A course may count as a general elective while leaving an essential requirement unfinished.

A student may therefore arrive with substantial academic experience and still need more coursework than expected.

This is the problem of **credit transferability and degree applicability**.

The distinction was consequential during Pax Academia itself.

In 2017, the Government Accountability Office examined national transfer data for a cohort of first-time college students followed from the 2003–2004 through 2008–2009 academic years.

Approximately 35 percent of students in the analyzed population transferred at least once.

GAO estimated that transferring students lost, on average, approximately 43 percent of their previously earned credits, measured as credits not accepted by the receiving institution.

Among students transferring between public institutions, the estimated loss was approximately 37 percent. For students transferring specifically from public two-year institutions to public four-year institutions, the estimated loss was approximately 22 percent (Government Accountability Office, 2017).

The estimates varied substantially by transfer pathway and should not be applied uniformly to community-college transfers.

They also did not isolate students with foster-care experience.

But they establish that significant transfer inefficiency was present among students moving between American colleges during the later years of Pax Academia.

The system could encourage students to begin at one institution without ensuring that their prior academic work would retain its full value at another.

The financial consequences were not trivial.

A course that does not satisfy a degree requirement may need to be replaced by another course.

That can require additional tuition.

Additional books.

More transportation.

Another semester of housing.

And more time before entering full-time employment.

For students receiving financial aid, unnecessary additional coursework can also consume limited assistance.

GAO identified these costs as potential consequences of credit loss.

The problem could therefore affect both individual finances and public expenditure.

A student might have completed the coursework successfully.

The receiving institution might still require additional work.

Academic progress within one institution had not necessarily become equivalent progress within the next.

That is the second threshold in practical terms.

However, the 43 percent national estimate should not be mistaken for a permanent or universal measure of transfer failure.

Later research demonstrates why the underlying definition matters.

In 2025, Logue and colleagues examined academic records for 796 students transferring vertically within the City University of New York system, primarily from Bronx Community College and Hostos Community College to Lehman College.

Their analysis distinguished credits that were accepted by the receiving institution from credits that actually applied toward degree requirements.

The researchers found that the applicability of credits could change at multiple stages of a student's education.

Some credits became inapplicable during transfer.

Others became applicable only later.

In certain circumstances, transfer itself allowed previously inapplicable coursework to satisfy new degree requirements.

The results also suggested that program-specific articulation agreements could improve the applicability of transferred coursework (Logue et al., 2025).

The study covered a targeted institutional sample, not the entire national transfer system.

It does not invalidate earlier findings about transfer inefficiency.

It makes the measurement more precise.

The problem is not always that academic credits disappear.

Sometimes they remain on a transcript without advancing the student toward the intended credential.

That distinction is especially relevant to this paper.

A student may receive credit for work already completed while still needing additional courses before graduation.

The credit exists.

Its developmental and economic value has been reduced.

The transcript can recognize effort without preserving its full usefulness.

For a student with adequate financial support, that inefficiency may be frustrating and expensive.

For a student without substantial financial reserves, it may create a more consequential interruption.

Additional semesters can increase exposure to housing instability, employment conflicts, debt, transportation costs, and the expiration of time-limited benefits.

This paper does not establish that foster-experienced transfer students lose credits at a higher rate than other students.

The evidence examined here does not support that specific conclusion.

The more supportable concern is that transfer inefficiency can impose additional time and financial requirements on students whose ability to absorb those requirements may already be limited.

A structural problem affecting many students may have different practical consequences depending on the resources available to them.

The second threshold therefore connects directly to the invisible family.

The financial cost of an additional semester is one issue.

The capacity to survive that semester is another.

National transfer outcomes illustrate the difference between entering community college, transferring to a four-year institution, and completing a bachelor's degree.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's March 2026 *Tracking Transfer* update examined students who entered community college in fall 2018 and followed their educational outcomes over six years.

Among students who had not previously attended college, 31.6 percent transferred to a four-year institution within that period.

Of those who transferred, 48.7 percent completed a bachelor's degree within the six-year observation window.

The report also identified important differences among students entering community college with prior dual-enrollment experience.

Those students transferred at higher rates and were more likely to complete bachelor's degrees after transfer.

Across the report's broader cohort of approximately 830,000 first-time, degree-seeking students who entered community college in fall 2018, including those with prior dual enrollment, 18.0 percent earned a bachelor's degree within six years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2026).

These findings describe related but distinct measures.

The transfer rate identifies the proportion of students who reached another institution.

The post-transfer completion rate identifies the proportion of transferring students who completed a bachelor's degree within the observation period.

The overall bachelor's completion rate describes attainment within the broader entering population.

Because the measures use different denominators, the 18.0 percent overall completion figure should not be derived by multiplying the 31.6 percent transfer rate by the 48.7 percent post-transfer completion rate.

The measures also do not establish that every student who failed to transfer or complete a bachelor's degree experienced an unsuccessful educational pathway.

Some students sought associate degrees, certificates, technical training, or other objectives that did not require transfer.

Others may have continued their education beyond the six-year observation period.

The distinction is therefore between access to an institution and completion of a particular educational objective, rather than between universally successful and unsuccessful students.

These figures also do not describe foster-experienced students specifically.

But the findings establish the significance of transfer as an institutional pathway.

Many students begin community college.

A smaller share reach a four-year institution.

A smaller share still complete the bachelor's degree within the observed period.

For students whose goal is a certificate or associate degree, that sequence is not the appropriate measure of success.

For students pursuing a bachelor's degree, however, it identifies a substantial difference between beginning postsecondary education and completing the intended pathway.

The CalYOUTH study provides a more specific view of students transitioning from foster care.

In a 2021 analysis, Okpych and colleagues examined educational outcomes among 719 participants in the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study.

Approximately 61.8 percent had enrolled in college by around age twenty-three.

Approximately 9.6 percent had completed a two-year or four-year college degree.

Within the full study population, 6.0 percent had earned a two-year degree and 3.6 percent had earned a four-year degree (Okpych et al., 2021).

Among the 446 participants who had enrolled in college, approximately 15.6 percent had completed a two-year or four-year degree by the observation point.

The Illinois, California, and national findings should not be treated as interchangeable completion measures.

The Illinois study reported certificate or degree completion among foster-experienced community-college students observed through linked administrative records.

The CalYOUTH study measured two-year and four-year degree attainment among a longitudinal sample of young people transitioning from foster care, assessed around age twenty-three.

The National Student Clearinghouse figures describe six-year transfer and bachelor's completion outcomes among a much broader population of community-college entrants.

The populations differ.

The observation periods differ.

And the credentials included in the completion measures are not identical.

The differences between their reported percentages therefore cannot establish the independent effect of foster-care experience on college completion.

What the studies collectively demonstrate is more limited but still consequential.

Postsecondary enrollment and eventual credential attainment are different outcomes.

The institutions responsible for supporting educational access must therefore be evaluated not only by the number of students who enter, but by what happens to students as they attempt to progress toward their chosen educational objectives.

The researchers also found that students whose first postsecondary enrollment occurred at a four-year institution had higher adjusted odds of degree completion than those who began at a two-year college.

The association remained after controlling for a range of observed personal, educational, and foster-care characteristics.

Only approximately 11 percent of the participants had first enrolled at a four-year institution.

That creates an important contrast.

The more common pathway was through institutions with comparatively accessible entry.

The less common pathway was associated with greater likelihood of degree completion.

The finding should not be interpreted to mean that community colleges caused lower attainment.

Students selecting different entry points may differ in academic preparation, financial circumstances, preferences, support networks, and other factors that are not fully captured by the analysis.

Four-year institutions also possess different academic structures and resources.

The evidence does not establish that placing every foster-experienced student directly into a university would produce the same completion advantage.

But it does suggest that the type of institution through which a young person enters higher education is associated with subsequent outcomes.

That makes the design of the community-college pathway consequential.

If community colleges serve as the principal entry point for many foster-experienced students, the ability to progress from that entry point must be treated as part of the educational opportunity being offered.

Otherwise, the system risks treating accessible entry as sufficient even when the student's intended destination remains difficult to reach.

The distinction between two-year and four-year institutions also has implications for the support available on campus.

Community colleges and universities differ in their residential arrangements, student-service infrastructure, academic advising, and the organizational resources they can devote to specialized programs.

But the difference is not a simple division between unsupported community colleges and well-supported universities.

California demonstrates a more complicated arrangement.

The Foster Youth Success Initiative, launched in 2007, established a system of designated foster-youth liaisons within community colleges.

Its purpose was to help students with foster-care experience obtain educational assistance and progress toward certificates, degrees, and transfer.

The initiative was followed by additional investments, including the development of NextUp.

By the 2023–2024 academic year, NextUp was operating across all 115 California community colleges, serving thousands of students with foster-care experience.

The program could provide individualized guidance, academic assistance, book and supply support, transportation assistance, financial literacy services, and referrals to other resources.

Transfer counseling was among its recognized services (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2025).

The expansion is significant.

It shows that community colleges can develop substantial support structures rather than functioning only as inexpensive points of entry.

It also demonstrates institutional learning since Pax Academia.

The problem identified during the earlier period produced additional programs and new efforts to coordinate educational opportunity.

At the university level, California's public systems also developed support arrangements for foster-experienced students.

The University of California currently identifies programs for current and former foster youth at all of its undergraduate campuses.

These programs can offer academic advising, counseling, financial-aid guidance, housing assistance, employment support, and orientation to university life (University of California, n.d.).

California therefore has support mechanisms on both sides of the community-college transfer pathway.

That is meaningful progress.

But the presence of support at the sending and receiving institutions is not, by itself, evidence that the transition between them is seamless.

A community-college program may know a student's academic history, financial circumstances, housing difficulties, and long-term educational goals.

The receiving institution may maintain its own eligibility criteria, intake procedures, staff responsibilities, and records.

The student may need to establish a new relationship with support personnel after transferring.

Some information may be shared through authorized referrals or institutional processes.

Other information may need to be supplied again.

Support can be continuous in purpose without being continuous in administration.

The distinction raises a question about how institutions define responsibility for a student moving between them.

Does the community college's responsibility conclude when the student transfers?

Does the university's responsibility begin when the student is admitted, enrolled, identified as eligible, or connected with a support program?

And who assists the student when the transition itself creates difficulties?

These questions are not evidence that California's transfer-support systems generally fail.

They identify the specific institutional boundary that a complete evaluation must examine.

A successful transfer is more than a change in enrollment status.

It can involve the preservation of academic progress, financial assistance, practical support, housing arrangements, and dependable advising.

Those components may require coordination before the student formally leaves the first institution.

If coordination begins only after the student arrives at the second, the transfer may already have imposed costs or uncertainty.

That is the distinction between supporting students at two institutions and supporting their movement between those institutions.

The second threshold also interacts with the different timelines examined in Section 6.

A student may begin community college while participating in extended foster care.

The student may receive housing assistance through an arrangement tied to that status.

Financial aid may be based on independent-student eligibility.

Additional expenses may be covered through an Education and Training Voucher.

A campus support program may provide counseling or emergency assistance.

These forms of support can overlap.

But they need not begin or end at the same time.

A student may reach twenty-one while still completing community-college coursework.

May transfer several years after first enrolling.

May need additional semesters because some credits do not satisfy the requirements of the receiving institution.

And may encounter different housing or living-expense arrangements after transfer.

The result is that educational progress and support eligibility can move along separate timelines.

The student's educational objective may remain unchanged.

The resources available to pursue it may change.

This is especially important because community-college transfer is often presented as a financial strategy.

Beginning at a lower-cost institution can reduce tuition expenditure.

But the total cost of obtaining a bachelor's degree depends on more than tuition during the first two years.

It depends on how efficiently credits apply toward the final degree.

How many additional semesters are required.

Whether the student can maintain employment.

Whether housing remains stable.

Whether assistance continues.

And whether the student can absorb interruptions without abandoning the pathway.

A less expensive entry point does not necessarily produce a less expensive completed education.

It may.

But the result depends on the entire pathway.

The same principle applies to public investment.

A state may provide tuition assistance during community-college attendance.

The student may complete substantial coursework.

But if transfer produces additional credits, additional time, or a loss of financial stability, the original investment may not produce the intended credential within the anticipated period.

That does not mean the earlier education was worthless.

Credits can create knowledge and skills even when they do not satisfy a later degree requirement.

An associate degree may have independent labor-market value.

A student may later return and complete education.

And some students may make an informed decision to pursue another pathway.

The issue is narrower.

When public institutions explicitly support a student's progression toward a credential, preventable institutional inefficiencies can increase the cost and difficulty of achieving that objective.

Those costs are distributed across the student, educational institutions, financial-aid programs, and other public systems.

They also affect the timing of entry into employment and the opportunities available afterward.

These consequences connect the educational problem to the economic argument developed in the next section.

But they should not be reduced to a claim that every additional semester represents wasted public money.

Education has value beyond immediate credential production.

A young person's choices may change for legitimate reasons.

And institutional supports can produce important benefits even when the original academic objective is revised.

The economic question is whether the system imposes avoidable costs that do not contribute proportionately to educational or developmental outcomes.

That question requires distinguishing the cost of providing support from the cost of failing to provide it effectively.

The second threshold therefore has two dimensions.

The first is academic.

Can a student's completed work continue to count toward the intended educational objective?

The second is developmental.

Can the student retain enough practical support to continue pursuing that objective after changing institutions?

The two dimensions are related.

An academic delay can increase living expenses.

A housing disruption can interrupt academic progress.

A transfer can alter access to specialized assistance.

The resulting difficulties may not belong exclusively to the community college or the university.

They can emerge through the relationship between them.

That brings the investigation back to the larger institutional argument.

Pax Academia increasingly encouraged Americans to seek advancement through higher education.

For many young people, the route was not a single continuous experience.

It required entry, persistence, movement, and completion across different institutions.

Foster-experienced students could enter that system with fewer dependable resources to manage its interruptions.

Public policy responded with financial assistance, specialized programs, extended care, and campus support.

Those responses could improve access and provide meaningful assistance.

But their existence did not automatically establish continuity across the full educational pathway.

A student could reach college without reaching the intended credential.

Could earn credits without having every credit advance the degree.

Could move between institutions without carrying every support relationship forward.

And could remain educationally capable while experiencing the expiration of an assistance program.

The second threshold is therefore not simply another admissions decision.

It is the point where formal educational access must become sustained institutional progression.

That progression requires more than an open door.

It requires that the work, resources, and support accumulated before the door retain their usefulness afterward.

This is where the educational promise meets a broader economic question.

The United States invested resources in children through public care.

It invested additional resources in educational access.

It developed programs intended to support the transition between those systems.

Yet incomplete pathways, interrupted education, and fragmented assistance could limit the benefits eventually realized from those investments.

The next question is not whether every young person should attend college.

Nor is it whether every public expenditure must produce a positive financial return.

It is whether a more dependable transition could improve adult outcomes while reducing avoidable losses of educational, economic, and public resources.

8. The Unfinished Investment

The United States spends substantial public resources protecting children who cannot safely remain in their existing family arrangements.

That responsibility is not an ordinary financial transaction.

Children are not assets owned by the state, and the value of their lives cannot be reduced to the taxes they may eventually pay.

The purpose of foster care is protection, safety, and development.

But the public resources committed to those purposes create another legitimate question.

What happens when the institutions responsible for supporting a child's development do not provide a dependable pathway into adulthood?

The question is economic as well as human.

A young person may leave public care without stable housing.

May begin postsecondary education without completing a credential.

May enter employment without earning enough to maintain independence.

May need emergency assistance, experience repeated interruptions, or return to public systems through circumstances that better transition support might have helped prevent.

These outcomes are not predetermined.

Nor can their costs automatically be attributed to foster care or to the absence of any particular intervention.

But they establish the possibility that an institutional discontinuity can impose costs beyond the immediate consequences experienced by the individual.

A public system can spend heavily during childhood while failing to sustain the conditions necessary for those expenditures to contribute to successful adult development.

This paper describes that possibility as **the unfinished investment**.

The term does not imply that money spent protecting a child is wasted if the child later experiences unemployment, illness, disability, educational difficulty, or reliance on public assistance.

Protection has value independent of subsequent earnings.

Nor does it suggest that people become public liabilities when they fail to meet an economic target.

The term identifies a narrower institutional problem.

When governments make a substantial developmental commitment, they have reason to examine whether avoidable discontinuities reduce the outcomes that commitment was intended to support.

The relevant economic question is not whether the money already spent during childhood can be recovered.

Those expenditures have already occurred.

The relevant question is whether an additional, appropriately designed investment during the transition to adulthood would improve outcomes sufficiently to justify its incremental cost.

That requires a different calculation from simply comparing the total cost of foster care with a person's future earnings.

The earlier expenditure is part of the historical baseline.

A proposed intervention must be evaluated against what would otherwise happen.

If government provides additional housing stability, educational assistance, or transition support, the incremental cost is the additional public expenditure required to deliver that assistance.

The benefits are the improvements attributable to that intervention relative to the alternative.

They may include higher earnings, more stable housing, improved educational outcomes, reduced emergency expenditures, and other changes.

But those outcomes cannot all be treated as government savings.

The beneficiaries are different.

A person may earn more money.

Government may collect additional taxes.

Employers may benefit from a more stable workforce.

Public agencies may avoid certain expenditures.

Families and communities may experience improvements not captured in any public budget.

These benefits overlap economically, but they do not enter the same accounts.

A credible analysis must distinguish them.

This paper uses three principal perspectives.

The **individual perspective** concerns earnings, material stability, education, opportunity, and other consequences experienced by the young person.

The **fiscal perspective** concerns changes in government expenditure and revenue, net of the costs of the intervention.

The **societal perspective** considers the wider economic value of the outcomes, including benefits that do not appear as government revenue or savings.

The three measures answer different questions.

An intervention may be valuable to the young person without paying for itself through taxes.

It may produce government savings without adequately improving the person's quality of life.

And it may generate broad societal benefits that exceed both the individual's monetary gains and the government's fiscal return.

None should be substituted for another.

This distinction is especially important when evaluating the transition from foster care.

The underlying objective is not to maximize tax receipts from former foster youth.

It is to improve the conditions under which young adults can develop their capabilities and participate in economic and social life.

The fiscal question asks what those improvements would cost government and what portion of their value might return through public accounts.

That is a legitimate question of institutional design.

It is not a test of whether the individual deserves support.

The economic argument had already begun to emerge before Pax Academia ended.

In June 2009, researchers at Chapin Hall published an analysis of the potential costs and benefits of extending foster care to age twenty-one.

Drawing on the Midwest Evaluation and related evidence, the analysis estimated a gross additional cost of approximately $41,600 per young person, reduced to $37,948 after projected public-assistance savings. Under its central assumptions, the model estimated approximately $72,000 in additional lifetime earnings, discounted at 3 percent (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, and Pollack, 2009).

The estimate was explicitly prospective.

It depended on assumptions about improved educational attainment and the subsequent earnings associated with education (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, and Pollack, 2009).

It did not establish that the government would recover $72,000 in tax revenue.

Additional lifetime earnings primarily benefit the person earning them.

The public fiscal return would depend on taxes, additional government expenditures, avoided costs, and other consequences.

Nor was the projected improvement in educational attainment guaranteed.

The model illustrated a possible economic benefit of sustained support rather than proving that every extended-care arrangement would produce the same result.

Its historical importance is nevertheless substantial.

By the end of Pax Academia, researchers were already asking whether continued public assistance beyond eighteen could generate meaningful economic returns.

The economic case was developing alongside the legislative recognition that adulthood could not reliably be reduced to an age threshold.

The question was no longer only how much it cost to continue assistance.

It was also what additional support might make possible.

Washington State provides one of the most detailed subsequent evaluations of that question.

In May 2020, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) published *Extended Foster Care in Washington State: Final Report*.

The study examined the state's extended foster-care arrangements, which allowed eligible young adults to continue receiving assistance between ages eighteen and twenty-one.

Washington began with a limited educational extension in 2006 and expanded eligibility over the following years.

By 2018, approximately 80 percent of young people aging out of care were receiving extended foster-care services, compared with approximately 5 percent in 2006.

The expansion provided researchers with an opportunity to examine adult outcomes across different cohorts and participation arrangements.

The investigators used linked administrative records to compare young people who received extended care with those who did not.

They applied statistical weighting and regression adjustment to account for observed differences between participants and the comparison population.

The approach was stronger than a simple comparison of unadjusted outcomes.

It was not a randomized experiment.

That distinction matters because young people who choose or qualify for extended care may differ from those who do not participate in ways that are not fully visible in administrative records.

Motivation, family relationships, informal support, local service availability, and other circumstances may influence both participation and later outcomes.

Statistical adjustment can reduce differences associated with measured characteristics.

It cannot guarantee that all relevant differences have been eliminated.

The Washington findings are therefore important observational evidence rather than conclusive proof that every reported difference was caused by extended care.

The results nevertheless provide a useful picture of the economic conditions researchers observed.

Between ages eighteen and twenty-one, approximately 73 percent of extended-care participants had recorded earnings, compared with 62 percent of the adjusted comparison group.

Average annual wages were approximately $4,228 among participants and $2,729 among nonparticipants, a difference of roughly $1,500.

Between ages twenty-one and twenty-three, the employment difference persisted.

Approximately 76 percent of extended-care participants had earnings, compared with 62 percent of the comparison group.

Average annual wages were approximately $8,604 and $4,431, respectively (Miller, Bales, and Hirsch, 2020).

These are differences in observed, statistically adjusted early-adult outcomes.

They are not lifetime earnings gains.

Nor do the wage levels demonstrate that participants had achieved economic independence.

The reported annual earnings remained low.

But the differences suggest that continued support was associated with stronger early labor-market participation and earning capacity.

The study also reported favorable associations in several other areas.

Extended-care participants were less likely to experience homelessness, receive certain forms of public assistance, visit emergency departments, receive substance-use diagnoses, or have criminal convictions.

Researchers also reported lower rates of involvement in the child-welfare system among the participants' children.

These outcomes matter for reasons beyond their monetary value.

Stable housing affects personal safety and the ability to maintain education or employment.

Reduced criminal involvement changes lives as well as public expenditure.

And improved circumstances for a participant's children can affect the next generation.

But the economic value assigned to these outcomes must be distinguished from the outcomes directly observed.

Washington's researchers used a lifetime benefit-cost model to estimate the monetary consequences of the differences reported in administrative records.

The model converted observed early-adult associations and other estimated effects into projections of future earnings, tax revenue, public expenditures, crime-related costs, and intergenerational outcomes.

It then discounted those future amounts into a comparable monetary basis.

The resulting estimates were reported in 2019 dollars.

The model estimated an incremental cost of $19,113 per extended-care participant, based on an average participation period of approximately two years.

Against that cost, it estimated total lifetime benefits of $75,529.

That produced approximately $56,415 in net societal benefits and a benefit-cost ratio of $3.95 for every dollar spent (Miller, Bales, and Hirsch, 2020).

The result was substantial.

But the total was not equivalent to a government budget surplus.

The researchers divided estimated benefits among taxpayers, participants, other affected parties, and indirect economic effects.

The taxpayer portion was $30,328 per participant.

After subtracting the $19,113 program cost, the estimated net fiscal benefit was $11,215.

But this figure combines projected benefits to federal, state, and local governments.

WSIPP's Exhibit 17 separates those accounts.

Of the $19,113 estimated program cost, approximately $9,557 was assigned to state and local government and $9,557 to the federal government, reflecting the funding assumptions used in the evaluation.

The model estimated $14,648 in gross benefits to state and local taxpayers, consisting of projected reductions in government expenditures and increases in tax revenue.

After the assigned program cost, the estimated net state and local fiscal benefit was $5,091 per participant.

The federal government was assigned $15,680 in gross benefits and a net fiscal benefit of $6,124.

Together, those amounts produced the reported $11,215 net taxpayer benefit, subject to rounding (Miller, Bales, and Hirsch, 2020).

This distinction matters because a program's combined fiscal return does not necessarily accrue to the government responsible for making a particular funding decision.

State governments may bear costs that produce some benefits through federal revenue or expenditure.

Federal expenditures may similarly contribute to outcomes whose benefits appear in state and local accounts.

A positive combined fiscal result therefore does not establish an identical return for every participating government.

Nor do the reported figures represent revenue already collected or expenditure reductions already realized.

They are modeled lifetime values derived from the evaluation's observed associations, projected consequences, and assumptions about future economic activity.

The remaining modeled societal benefits accrued to participants, other affected parties, and indirect economic effects.

The distinction changes the interpretation.

A $75,529 lifetime societal benefit is not $75,529 in government savings.

A $30,328 taxpayer benefit is not $30,328 in net fiscal return.

And neither estimate represents cash observed in government accounts over the study's follow-up period.

They are modeled values constructed from the study's estimated effects and longer-term economic assumptions.

The central result can be summarized as follows.

Measure	Estimated amount or ratio
Additional extended-care cost	$19,113
Gross modeled taxpayer benefits	$30,328
Net modeled fiscal benefit	+$11,215
Gross modeled societal benefits	$75,529
Net modeled societal benefit	+$56,415
Total societal benefit-cost ratio	3.95:1

Source: Miller, Bales, and Hirsch (2020), Exhibits 17–18. All amounts are in 2019 dollars. Displayed totals reflect the source report's rounding.

These findings support a meaningful economic proposition.

Continued assistance during the transition to adulthood can plausibly produce benefits beyond the amount government initially spends.

But the source of those benefits deserves examination.

The Washington model estimated approximately $8,919 in additional tax revenue resulting from increased labor-market earnings among participants.

It also estimated approximately $4,003 in government savings associated with reduced crime.

Other components included changes in public assistance, healthcare-related costs, child-welfare involvement, and projected outcomes for participants' children.

A substantial share of the taxpayer benefits therefore depended on more than the participant's immediate earnings.

The model incorporated intergenerational effects.

These included projected changes in the likelihood of participants' children entering the child-welfare system, associated government costs, and the future tax revenue attributed to improved outcomes for those children.

That modeling choice is defensible as an attempt to capture effects extending beyond the original participant.

It also introduces additional uncertainty.

A measured difference in early-adult circumstances can be projected across a much longer period.

A modeled difference in children's outcomes extends the time horizon further.

The longer the projection, the more consequential the underlying assumptions become.

That does not mean the benefits should automatically be excluded.

It means the conclusion should be tested without assuming that every projected component is equally certain.

The Washington findings permit a useful sensitivity test.

The published taxpayer benefit estimate includes approximately $10,055 per participant in modeled benefits associated with the outcomes of participants' children.

That total consists of $1,926 in reduced child-welfare involvement costs, $3,271 in other downstream government savings, and $4,858 in additional tax revenue attributed to improved outcomes for the next generation.

Removing those components does not reverse the underlying statistical evaluation.

It is a narrower accounting exercise.

It asks what remains of the reported fiscal result if the intergenerational benefit categories are excluded.

Under that restriction, estimated taxpayer benefits fall from $30,328 to $20,273.

After subtracting the same $19,113 program cost, the modeled net fiscal return falls to approximately $1,160 per participant.

The resulting taxpayer benefit-cost ratio is approximately 1.06.

The fiscal case remains slightly positive.

But most of the previously reported surplus disappears.

A second restriction removes the model's $4,003 in government savings associated with reduced crime.

The remaining taxpayer benefits fall to approximately $16,270.

Against the unchanged program cost, that produces an illustrative net fiscal loss of approximately $2,843 per participant.

The resulting taxpayer benefit-cost ratio falls below one.

Illustrative taxpayer sensitivity	Benefits	Net of $19,113 cost
Published model	$30,328	+$11,215
Excluding intergenerational benefits	$20,273	+$1,160
Excluding intergenerational and crime-related savings	$16,270	−$2,843

Author calculations based on Miller, Bales, and Hirsch (2020), Exhibit 17. These are component-removal sensitivities, not revised causal estimates or new WSIPP forecasts.

The sensitivity test does not establish that the omitted benefits are imaginary.

Crime-related costs are real.

The well-being of participants' children is consequential.

And long-term societal effects can be legitimate considerations in public investment decisions.

The test establishes something different.

The magnitude and even the direction of the estimated fiscal return depend on which projected outcomes are included.

A positive fiscal result is therefore not an unconditional property of extended foster care.

It is a conclusion produced by a particular evaluation, program, population, cost structure, and benefit model.

The societal result is less fragile under these limited accounting tests.

Across the government, participant-family, other-party, and indirect categories, the intergenerational components reported in WSIPP's Exhibits 17–18 total approximately $28,062 per participant (author calculation).

Removing those estimated intergenerational benefits reduces gross societal benefits to approximately $47,467.

After program costs, the result remains approximately $28,354 in positive net societal benefits per participant.

If the model's $4,003 in government crime savings and $10,437 in reduced victim costs are also removed, the residual net societal benefit remains approximately $13,914.

These are still positive results.

But they are narrower than the published model's $56,415 net estimate.

And they remain dependent on the validity of the other modeled effects.

This distinction is central to *Invisible*.

A program may be socially beneficial without demonstrating a large taxpayer surplus.

Its strongest benefits may accrue to the young people receiving assistance, to their families, and to others affected by their improved circumstances.

Government can reasonably support such a program even if the fiscal return is uncertain or negative.

But it should not present the entire social value as money returning to the treasury.

Nor should the paper imply that a modeled lifetime return has already been realized.

Washington's published model reported a 99.9 percent probability of positive net societal benefits under its specified risk analysis.

That result should not be interpreted as a 99.9 percent probability that the program would generate a positive fiscal return for taxpayers.

Nor is it an independent measure of confidence in the study's causal assumptions.

It describes the likelihood of positive societal benefits within the uncertainty structure represented by WSIPP's economic model.

The model's sensitivity to excluded benefit categories, and the limitations of the underlying observational evaluation, remain separate considerations.

It does not eliminate uncertainty arising from nonrandom participation, unmeasured differences between groups, incomplete administrative coverage, or the possibility that the modeled effects would not persist under another policy design.

The distinction between modeled precision and causal certainty must remain explicit.

The Washington report itself recognized the limitations of its observational design.

The study also excluded young people qualifying through the newer medical-condition eligibility pathway, limiting the extent to which its findings describe the entire population eligible for extended care.

It also acknowledged that its administrative data did not fully capture individuals who left the state, entered military service, worked in federal employment, or performed work outside the covered state earnings systems.

These limitations do not invalidate the evaluation.

They restrict what can be concluded from it.

The evidence supports the possibility of meaningful returns from extended support.

It does not establish a national rate of return that can be applied automatically to every young person leaving foster care.

A different evaluation illustrates why that caution is necessary.

The Youth Villages Transitional Living program, now known as YVLifeSet, provides intensive individualized assistance to young adults with experience in foster care or juvenile justice custody.

Its services include case management, practical guidance, employment assistance, education-related coordination, and support in addressing barriers to independent living.

Unlike Washington's extended-care evaluation, the Tennessee study used randomized assignment.

Between 2010 and 2012, 1,322 eligible young adults were assigned either to the program group or to a comparison group receiving information about other community resources.

Randomization strengthened the researchers' ability to attribute measured differences to the intervention.

The results were mixed.

The program produced modest improvements in employment and earnings.

In the twelve-month follow-up, the program was estimated to increase self-reported earnings from formal work by approximately $611 among the 1,114 survey respondents.

Other findings indicated improvements in housing stability and some measures of economic well-being.

But the evaluation found no statistically significant effects on the educational outcomes it measured, including postsecondary enrollment, high-school diploma completion, GED receipt, and vocational training.

Nor did it find significant improvements across every domain the intervention was designed to influence (Courtney, Valentine, and Skemer, 2019).

This matters because the intervention did not fail simply because some outcomes did not improve.

It produced benefits in particular areas.

But those benefits were not equivalent to a general transformation of adult outcomes.

An intervention can improve employment without increasing college completion.

It can improve housing stability without changing every educational decision.

And it can increase earnings modestly without generating enough measurable additional tax revenue to offset its full cost.

The randomized evidence therefore imposes an important limitation on the economic argument.

Transition support is not one uniform treatment.

Different programs have different intensities, durations, eligibility criteria, and combinations of services.

Their effects cannot be assumed interchangeable.

A housing-centered program may produce different outcomes from an education voucher.

Extended foster care may operate differently from time-limited case management.

And a comprehensive transition arrangement may generate benefits through several channels without ensuring improvement in every one.

A 2025 evaluation of California's My First Place program provides another useful comparison.

The program combines subsidized housing with intensive case management for young adults transitioning from foster care.

Chapin Hall's detailed analysis examined 2,418 young adults, including 571 who completed the program, 1,027 who enrolled without completing it, and 820 who were referred but did not enroll. The report's executive summary gives a larger sample of 2,598; the figures used here follow its detailed sample description and tables.

Researchers compared employment, earnings, and educational outcomes using administrative data and statistical methods.

The study found favorable associations among program completers.

Three years after their program exit, completers were approximately 1.5 times as likely to be employed as nonparticipants.

Among those employed, program completers had average earnings approximately 37 percent higher than nonparticipants three years after the program-exit reference year.

Longer participation, planned exits, and transitions to stable housing were also associated with better employment and earnings outcomes (Dworsky, Griffin, and Van Drunen, 2025).

These findings are encouraging.

But they require a different interpretation from a randomized program effect.

Program completion itself was partly defined by stable housing and educational or employment progress, further limiting the extent to which differences between completers and other participants can be interpreted as program effects.

Those differences may contribute to later outcomes.

The observed earnings gap cannot automatically be attributed entirely to the program.

The educational findings provide another warning against overgeneralization.

Participation was associated with higher rates of college enrollment and semester completion.

But the evaluation did not find a corresponding increase in postsecondary credential attainment.

More educational participation did not automatically become more completed credentials.

That finding connects directly to the second threshold examined in the preceding section.

Stabilizing housing and increasing college engagement may improve important parts of a young person's circumstances without independently resolving every barrier to completion.

The intervention can be useful.

The educational pathway may still remain unfinished.

These studies should therefore be read together rather than treated as competing slogans.

Washington suggests that extended public support can be associated with substantial improvements in early-adult outcomes and potentially positive lifetime benefits.

The Youth Villages randomized evaluation demonstrates that transition assistance can produce narrower, measurable improvements without significant educational effects.

My First Place suggests that housing stability and intensive support may be associated with stronger employment outcomes while leaving credential attainment unresolved.

The evidence is neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative.

It supports a more selective conclusion.

The economic value of transition assistance depends on what assistance is provided, whom it reaches, which outcomes it changes, and how those changes persist over time.

That is a stronger basis for institutional redesign than assuming either that every dollar spent will pay for itself or that additional assistance is merely an unrecoverable expense.

The next economic question concerns the design of the intervention itself.

A broad promise to improve foster-youth outcomes is not sufficiently defined to evaluate.

The cost of paying tuition is different from the cost of providing stable housing.

The cost of emergency assistance is different from the cost of maintaining ongoing case management.

A program assisting students who have already entered college serves a different population from a program beginning before the transition out of foster care.

The expected outcomes will also differ.

This paper therefore distinguishes three possible levels of intervention for analytical purposes.

The first is **educational access assistance**.

This includes tuition support, financial-aid guidance, enrollment help, academic advising, and assistance navigating postsecondary institutions.

Its primary objective is to improve access to and progression through education.

The second is **educational access combined with material stability**.

This adds housing assistance, emergency financial support, transportation help, or related services intended to reduce interruptions that prevent students from remaining enrolled.

Its objective is not simply to increase enrollment.

It is to improve the conditions under which enrollment can be sustained.

The third is **comprehensive transition continuity**.

This may include educational assistance, material support, housing coordination, employment guidance, access to trusted adults, and mechanisms for returning to assistance after an interruption.

Its objective is broader than college completion.

It concerns the young person's capacity to move through education, employment, and independent living without losing all support at each institutional boundary.

These are analytical categories, not standardized program models or independently evaluated interventions.

No national cost estimate is assigned to them here.

Existing evidence does not establish the price of one uniform package containing every proposed component.

Nor can the effects of separate programs simply be added together.

If housing assistance and educational advising influence some of the same outcomes, summing their independently estimated benefits may double-count the gain.

Likewise, the cost of extended foster care cannot be treated as the marginal cost of providing one additional educational service.

The packages would have to be specified, costed, and evaluated against relevant alternatives.

A rigorous fiscal model would begin with the incremental cost of providing each defined arrangement.

It would then estimate the changes attributable to that arrangement in employment, earnings, educational attainment, housing stability, public assistance, healthcare utilization, and other measurable outcomes.

Future benefits and costs would need to be discounted consistently.

Transfers between government and individuals would need to be distinguished from genuine changes in total economic resources.

Changes in tax revenue would need to be separated from changes in gross earnings.

And the evaluation would have to account for the public costs of administering and maintaining the intervention.

The model would also need to preserve the population denominator.

An intervention may achieve strong results among young adults who remain engaged with a program.

Its effect at the population level also depends on how many eligible people participate and whether those who do not participate differ in ways that affect outcomes.

The realized return of a program is not established by the return among its most successful participants.

A national or state model must evaluate the expected results across the population the policy is intended to reach.

It must also consider the difference between average and marginal returns.

The first participants in a program may be those most able or willing to use it.

Expanding the program may reach young people with different needs, costs, and likely outcomes.

That does not make expansion undesirable.

It means the return estimated from one group cannot automatically be assigned to the next.

A program may also exhibit economies of scale in administration or higher costs when additional participants require more intensive services.

Those possibilities need evidence rather than assumption.

The fiscal break-even condition is straightforward in principle.

The present value of additional public revenue and avoided public expenditure must equal or exceed the present value of the intervention's additional public cost.

But the inputs are not straightforward.

The result depends on causal effects, utilization, program costs, labor-market conditions, the duration of those effects, and the government level at which each cost or benefit is recorded.

A state may finance part of a program while the federal government receives part of the later tax revenue.

A county may avoid some service costs while another public agency incurs new costs.

The national fiscal return can therefore differ from the return experienced by the institution responsible for paying.

This introduces another form of fragmentation.

The organization financing the transition may not capture all of its fiscal benefits.

That creates a potential mismatch between the level of government making an investment and the level of government receiving the return.

The Washington evaluation accounted for state, local, and federal taxpayer perspectives separately.

Its model estimated positive net fiscal benefits for both the state-local and federal groupings under the reported assumptions.

But the distribution of costs and benefits would differ under another state's financing arrangements or another intervention.

The public system therefore cannot assume that a beneficial investment will necessarily be attractive to every institution asked to finance it.

Coordination may matter for financing as well as service delivery.

The same problem appears in higher education.

A child-welfare agency may finance assistance that helps a young person remain enrolled.

A college may report improved retention.

The young person may later earn more.

Government may collect additional taxes.

But no one institution necessarily records the complete sequence as its own result.

The costs are immediate and assigned.

The benefits may be delayed and distributed.

That arrangement can make effective prevention and developmental support more difficult to justify through individual agency budgets.

It does not prove that governments consistently underinvest.

It identifies why a narrow budget perspective can miss economic consequences that occur outside the budget being examined.

The economic case for continuity therefore depends on a public accounting framework broad enough to follow the transition.

This is not a request to price every feature of human development.

Some outcomes remain difficult to monetize.

Some cannot responsibly be reduced to a financial equivalent.

And public obligations to children and young adults cannot depend entirely on a positive benefit-cost calculation.

But the inability to monetize everything does not justify ignoring the costs and benefits that can be measured.

It requires precision about what has been measured and what remains outside the model.

The available evidence establishes that additional transition support can produce meaningful benefits.

It also establishes that effects vary across programs and outcomes, and that the strongest fiscal estimates depend on assumptions extending beyond directly observed results.

The conclusion should therefore remain conditional.

A more dependable transition may create substantial economic value.

Some of that value may return to government.

Some may remain with the young person and the wider society.

Whether a specific intervention produces a positive fiscal return must be demonstrated rather than presumed.

That conclusion does not weaken the central argument of *Invisible*.

It makes it more precise.

The public investment made during childhood cannot be justified retroactively by demanding that every young person produce a financial surplus.

But the system can reasonably be asked whether its own administrative boundaries create avoidable losses of educational and economic opportunity.

A young person who needs another semester, a period of stable housing, assistance navigating financial aid, or an opportunity to recover after an interruption does not necessarily need permanent public supervision.

The question is whether targeted continuity could improve the likelihood that earlier educational and developmental progress becomes durable adult capability.

That is the economic promise worth testing.

Not that every former foster youth will become a profitable return on public expenditure.

Not that every intervention will pay for itself.

And not that the state can eliminate all uncertainty from adulthood.

The proposition is narrower and more substantial.

A public system that assumes responsibility for childhood development has reason to examine whether preventable discontinuities are diminishing the adult opportunities that its earlier commitments helped make possible.

The evidence suggests that improving continuity can generate benefits.

It does not yet establish one universal mechanism for producing them.

The remaining task is therefore institutional.

How can assistance remain available across the transition to adulthood without extending public custody or making independence conditional on permanent supervision?

And how can the system preserve support, accountability, and the young person's autonomy at the same time?

9. Continuity Without Custody

The transition to adulthood does not require the permanent extension of childhood.

Young people leaving foster care do not need to remain children in the eyes of government.

They need the opportunity to become adults under conditions that do not make every interruption irreversible.

That is a different institutional objective.

The preceding sections have examined the growing importance of higher education during Pax Academia, the educational disadvantages experienced by young people with foster-care histories, the informal family support underlying many successful transitions, and the public programs developed in response.

The record is not one of complete institutional neglect.

Federal and state governments recognized the problem.

They expanded assistance.

They modified eligibility rules.

They supported educational participation.

They extended foster care into early adulthood in participating jurisdictions.

They developed specialized housing programs, campus-based services, and mechanisms for collecting adult outcome data.

These interventions have provided meaningful assistance. Some evaluations have identified improvements in educational participation, employment, earnings, and housing stability. Federal oversight has also documented uneven service coverage, weaknesses in coordination, and limitations in the measurement of adult outcomes.

The evidence nevertheless requires an important distinction.

The existence of institutional discontinuities does not establish how much of the educational disadvantage experienced by foster-experienced young people those discontinuities explain.

Educational preparation, childhood instability, family resources, housing conditions, health, and labor-market circumstances may independently affect adult outcomes. These factors may also influence whether a young person qualifies for, seeks, or remains engaged with particular assistance programs.

The comparison of young people in Illinois with their counterparts in Iowa and Wisconsin suggests that continued public support can be associated with stronger educational participation. It does not establish that improved coordination between institutions independently produced those differences.

The institutional argument developed in this paper is therefore narrower than the claim that fragmented services cause the overall educational disparity.

Existing research documents substantial disparities and identifiable limitations in the delivery and coordination of assistance. The analysis identifies a plausible mechanism through which those limitations may increase the difficulty of sustaining education, housing, and other forms of adult development.

Whether a deliberately coordinated arrangement would produce better outcomes, and by how much, remains an empirical question.

The system has become more extensive without necessarily becoming continuous.

That distinction suggests a different way to frame the remaining policy problem.

The objective is not simply to increase the number of programs available to young adults.

Nor is it to extend every existing benefit until the same age.

The objective is to ensure that the transition from public care into independent adulthood does not depend on a young person successfully coordinating a collection of institutions whose responsibilities begin and end at different points.

This paper refers to that principle as **continuity without custody**.

Continuity means that assistance, information, relationships, and opportunities can remain accessible across changes in legal status, education, employment, housing, and institutional participation.

Without custody means that the adult's access to appropriate support does not necessarily require remaining under the supervisory arrangements associated with childhood foster care.

The principle is not a proposal for unconditional public financing of every need throughout adulthood.

It is a distinction between the availability of developmental assistance and the continuation of formal state supervision.

The two can overlap.

They need not be inseparable.

Extended foster care demonstrates why this distinction matters.

California's program allows eligible young adults to remain in foster care until age twenty-one, receiving case management, housing assistance, and other transition services.

Participation is voluntary.

A young person can leave and, under specified conditions, reenter before the age limit.

That arrangement recognizes a practical feature of the transition to adulthood.

A decision to attempt independence need not be final.

A young adult may leave care believing that employment, housing, or education will provide sufficient stability.

Circumstances may change.

The first arrangement may not work.

The young person may discover that additional assistance is necessary.

Reentry creates an opportunity to recover.

It changes the consequences of the original exit.

But reentry also demonstrates the limits of providing continued support primarily through an existing foster-care administrative framework. California's nonminor dependents retain their legal status and decision-making authority as adults. The remaining constraint is not necessarily legal custody, but the requirement to participate in a particular system of court jurisdiction, agency oversight, eligibility, and service administration.

To regain the full range of extended-care assistance, a young adult must satisfy the program's eligibility conditions and reestablish a formal relationship with the child-welfare system.

That relationship can be helpful.

It may be exactly what some young adults want.

But it is not necessarily the only appropriate arrangement for everyone who needs assistance.

A person may be capable of managing an independent household while needing temporary help with tuition.

May be employed while needing housing assistance after a disruption.

May be enrolled in college while needing advice about financial aid or transfer.

May want access to a trusted professional without returning to court-supervised foster care.

Those circumstances do not necessarily require the same institutional response.

The need for assistance and the need for supervision are separate questions.

A system organized around continuity should be capable of recognizing that difference.

This is not an entirely new direction in American policy.

The Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood already authorizes services for eligible young people who have left foster care.

Its statutory purposes include education, employment, financial assistance, housing, counseling, and the development of meaningful connections with caring adults (Landers, 2026).

Education and Training Vouchers can remain available beyond the ordinary age of foster-care participation, within the program's statutory limits.

Specialized housing arrangements may serve young adults after they leave care.

Qualifying former foster youth may retain Medicaid coverage until twenty-six.

These policies already separate some forms of adult assistance from continued foster-care supervision.

The problem is that the separation remains incomplete and unevenly coordinated.

A young person may have access to several benefits without possessing one dependable way to understand, obtain, and retain them.

An individual program may continue.

The relationship connecting the individual to that program may not.

Continuity without custody would treat that connection as an institutional responsibility in its own right.

The first requirement is that the young adult remain the principal decision-maker.

This is not only a matter of personal dignity.

It affects whether transition assistance serves the individual's actual objectives.

The foster-care system necessarily makes decisions for and about children.

Those decisions are subject to legal standards, agency responsibilities, and judicial oversight intended to protect their welfare.

But the purpose of transition assistance is different.

It is to support the development and exercise of adult decision-making.

A transition arrangement that merely replaces childhood supervision with continuing administrative control risks undermining the independence it is intended to produce.

Federal law already recognizes the importance of youth-directed planning.

Under Title IV-E, a transition plan developed during the ninety-day period preceding an age-related exit from foster care must be personalized at the direction of the young person (42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(H)).

The plan must address specific options involving housing, healthcare, education, employment, mentoring, and continuing support services.

For young people aged fourteen or older, federal law requires their participation in developing and revising their case plans. They may also select up to two additional members of their case-planning team, excluding their foster parent or caseworker, subject to the state's authority to reject a selection for good cause (42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(B)).

These provisions recognize that young people should participate in the decisions shaping their futures.

But the presence of a legal requirement does not establish the quality of participation.

The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study examined this distinction in an analysis published in 2020.

Researchers used interviews with 727 young people in foster care, administrative child-welfare data, and a survey of 235 child-welfare workers.

Most young people reported some participation in developing their Transitional Independent Living Plan. However, 32 percent reported being unaware of or uninvolved in the process: approximately 27 percent did not know about their plan, while another 5 percent knew about it but had not participated in its development.

Participation in planning meetings presented a related distinction. Approximately 27 percent reported not participating in these meetings. Across respondents, 66 percent reported being satisfied or very satisfied, while 7 percent reported dissatisfaction (Powers et al., 2020).

The findings do not imply that every transition plan was ineffective.

They reveal a distinction between an administrative requirement and the young person's experience of the process.

A plan can be completed.

It can contain the required categories.

It can identify services.

But the young person may not recognize it as a plan developed through their own decisions.

That is a problem for any system intending to support adult autonomy.

Continuity without custody would require more than obtaining a signature or documenting attendance at a meeting.

The young person would need meaningful authority over the educational, employment, housing, and support objectives being pursued.

The resulting arrangement should recognize that independence includes the ability to decline assistance, revise a goal, or change direction.

The young adult may choose community college.

A four-year university.

Vocational training.

An apprenticeship.

Employment.

A period of caregiving.

Or another legitimate pathway.

The system should not define success solely through one preferred institutional destination.

Nor should it interpret a decision against college as evidence that the young person has rejected adulthood or squandered an opportunity.

Pax Academia made higher education an increasingly important pathway.

It did not make higher education the only meaningful future.

The purpose of continued assistance should be to make a young person's chosen pathway more attainable, not to require the young person to reproduce the expectations of the institution providing assistance.

This distinction applies to the way programs evaluate compliance.

A system organized around educational participation may be effective for students pursuing credentials.

But it should also recognize that academic interruption is not necessarily a withdrawal from productive adult development.

An unsuccessful semester may require intervention.

A change of program may reflect better information.

A temporary pause may allow the student to stabilize housing or employment.

The relevant question is not whether the young person follows an uninterrupted sequence.

It is whether the available support enables continued development when the sequence changes.

The young adult must therefore remain a participant with agency rather than an object of institutional management.

That is the first boundary of continuity without custody.

Support should expand the individual's ability to make decisions.

It should not become another system that makes every decision on the individual's behalf.

The second requirement is that assistance remain accessible after ordinary institutional relationships change.

The American public system already contains numerous supports for foster-experienced young adults.

But those supports frequently require separate applications, eligibility determinations, records, and institutional contacts.

A young person may receive a Chafee-funded service from one organization.

An education voucher from another.

Financial aid through a college.

Housing assistance through a public housing authority.

Healthcare through Medicaid.

And employment services through a workforce agency.

The institutions do not necessarily possess identical information.

They also do not necessarily have authority to make decisions for one another.

Some separation is appropriate.

A college should not determine Medicaid eligibility.

A child-welfare agency should not control a university's academic requirements.

A housing authority should not administer a student's degree program.

The purpose of continuity is not to merge every institution into one administrative organization.

It is to ensure that the person moving between institutions does not become solely responsible for reconciling the gaps among them.

That suggests a need for a continuing point of assistance.

Such a role might be called a transition navigator.

The title is less important than the responsibility.

The navigator would help the young adult understand available benefits, identify changing eligibility requirements, coordinate referrals, resolve administrative problems, and maintain contact across transitions.

The role could exist within an independent nonprofit, a campus support program, a state transition-services arrangement, or another authorized provider.

It would not necessarily require the creation of a new government agency.

Nor would every young adult require continuous case management.

Some might need regular assistance.

Others might need only occasional advice.

Still others might not use the service until an unexpected problem arose.

The design question is whether the assistance can remain accessible when the need appears.

A person should not have to remain an active case-management client indefinitely merely to preserve the option of asking for help.

Nor should leaving one institution require rebuilding the entire history of eligibility, assistance, and prior decisions.

The support relationship should be capable of changing intensity without disappearing entirely.

That is different from permanent supervision.

It is continuing access to assistance.

The distinction is especially useful when compared with the informal support described in Section 3.

Family reserve capacity does not ordinarily require a young adult to report their activities every month.

A parent or trusted relative may provide assistance when needed, reduce involvement when circumstances improve, and become more involved again after a disruption.

Public institutions cannot reproduce every function of family.

They cannot guarantee emotional intimacy, permanent personal commitment, or the unconditional availability of private resources.

Nor should a professional navigator be presented as a substitute parent.

But the system can recognize that intermittent assistance may be a normal feature of developing adulthood rather than evidence of personal failure.

The objective is not to manufacture a family.

It is to avoid requiring a young person to reconstruct an entire support network whenever a previously manageable problem becomes urgent.

The third requirement is a reversible pathway into assistance.

California's extended foster-care reentry framework demonstrates the value of permitting young adults to reconsider an earlier decision.

But the principle can be applied more narrowly than reentry into formal foster care.

A student who leaves college may need assistance returning.

A person who loses housing may need temporary stabilization.

A young adult who moves to another community may need help transferring benefits or locating services.

Someone who has been employed for several years may need educational guidance after deciding to pursue a credential.

Each of these circumstances involves renewed need.

Not all require renewed custody.

A more flexible transition system could distinguish between an initial application, continuing eligibility, and the intensity of assistance currently being used.

A person might establish a relationship with a transition-support provider before leaving foster care.

The provider could then remain a known point of contact within a defined eligibility period.

If the young adult required no assistance, active services could diminish.

If circumstances changed, the individual could request renewed assistance without repeating every element of the original intake process.

That does not eliminate eligibility rules.

Public expenditure must remain authorized and accountable.

Housing and financial benefits may require specific verification.

A young adult may age out of particular programs.

But the system should distinguish between information that genuinely must be reestablished and information already known and lawfully available.

The ability to return should be a designed feature rather than an exception dependent on the young person's persistence.

That is especially important because the need for assistance may arise during periods when the person has the least capacity to complete a complicated process.

A housing crisis may make it difficult to receive mail.

A loss of transportation may interfere with appointments.

An interruption in education may affect access to campus resources.

A financial emergency may make administrative delays consequential.

The process for returning to assistance should therefore be proportionate to the assistance requested.

A request for information should not require the same documentation as a long-term housing subsidy.

A small emergency intervention should not automatically require the young adult to enter an intensive supervisory arrangement.

And a student seeking help with transfer should not need to establish a new developmental history merely because the receiving institution uses different records.

This is not a claim that every agency can legally or administratively adopt such a system under current rules.

Some changes would require new authority, interagency agreements, or funding arrangements.

The principle identifies the design objective.

The path back to assistance should not be more difficult than the developmental problem it is intended to address.

The fourth requirement is continuity across institutions rather than continuity only within them.

Section 7 examined the second threshold between community colleges and four-year institutions.

That threshold provides a concrete example of the problem.

A student may have a dependable relationship with a community-college counselor.

The student may receive NextUp assistance.

The student may have an established financial-aid record, a course plan, and a history of educational progress.

When the student transfers, the academic record follows through formal processes.

But the surrounding assistance may not transfer automatically.

A receiving university may offer specialized services.

It may also require the student to establish eligibility, meet new staff, understand new policies, and identify available housing.

A more continuous arrangement would prepare for that transition before the student left the original institution.

The sending and receiving institutions could coordinate a referral, with the student's authorization.

The student could receive confirmation of which services will continue, which must be reapplied for, and which are unavailable.

A receiving support professional could become involved before the transfer becomes effective.

Unresolved questions about housing, tuition, financial aid, and academic requirements could be identified while the student still has assistance from the original institution.

This would not guarantee admission or completion.

It would reduce the extent to which the transition itself becomes an avoidable administrative problem.

California's NextUp program provides an existing example of the broader support philosophy.

The program combines academic counseling with financial, housing-related, and practical assistance for eligible community-college students with foster-care experience.

The 2024 legislative report described dedicated campus spaces, individualized assistance, college planning, financial-aid guidance, transportation support, food assistance, and other services (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2025).

An Urban Institute study of NextUp implementation found that students and staff valued individualized support and coordination with other campus programs.

The study documented variation across campuses and identified the importance of institutional leadership, coordination among support programs, and flexibility in responding to individual needs. However, staff also reported that unclear funding guidelines could make implementation difficult (Tucker et al., 2024).

These findings do not demonstrate that a single cross-institution navigator would improve graduation rates.

They show that existing programs already address multiple needs through relationships rather than isolated financial transactions.

In some NextUp programs, staff described coordinating separate campus support programs behind the scenes so students could receive assistance without navigating every distinction between institutional funding arrangements. The example demonstrates a limited form of administrative coordination already operating within individual colleges, although it does not establish how such an approach would perform across institutions (Tucker et al., 2024).

The proposed extension is to preserve the usefulness of those relationships across institutional boundaries.

A student should not have to lose the capacity to obtain support merely because educational progress requires moving to another college.

The same principle applies outside education.

A housing transition should not automatically sever employment assistance.

A change in healthcare coverage should not terminate access to unrelated educational support.

A move across jurisdictions should not require a young adult to discover every applicable resource without guidance.

Continuity does not mean identical benefits everywhere.

It means deliberate arrangements for what happens when the governing institution changes.

A successful handoff should be an institutional outcome.

Not merely an expectation placed on the individual.

The fifth requirement is to preserve relationships without making them compulsory.

The invisible family described earlier in this paper includes financial resources, practical assistance, emergency capacity, and trusted adult relationships.

Public programs can supply parts of that structure.

They cannot assume authority over the relationships themselves.

A young person may already possess a dependable relationship with a former foster parent, relative, sibling, teacher, mentor, or other adult.

That relationship may be more valuable than an additional institutional contact.

A transition-support system should therefore help young adults preserve and strengthen relationships they choose, where appropriate and safe.

The federal Chafee statute explicitly identifies lasting connections with caring adults as a program objective.

CalYOUTH research has also shown that young adults can receive different forms of support from relatives, peers, and professionals.

In a 2018 analysis, approximately 40 percent of surveyed young people reported insufficient emotional support, nearly half reported insufficient tangible assistance, and more than 30 percent reported insufficient advice or guidance.

Young people remaining in extended care were more likely to report sufficient tangible support and advice.

They were also more likely to identify professionals among their support networks.

Importantly, extended-care participation was not associated with a reduced likelihood of identifying relatives as support figures (Okpych et al., 2018).

The findings challenge the assumption that institutional assistance necessarily replaces family or personal relationships.

The two forms of support can coexist.

That coexistence should be intentional.

A young adult may want help maintaining contact with relatives.

Another may want assistance identifying a mentor.

Another may prefer working with a professional without involving relatives.

And someone else may want minimal involvement from any support organization.

The adult's choices should govern the arrangement within applicable law and safety requirements.

A program should not define success by the number of relationships it assigns to a participant.

It should be concerned with whether the person has access to relationships and assistance they consider dependable and useful.

The distinction also matters for the professional role.

A navigator may provide important continuity.

But a professional relationship should not be represented as unconditional or permanent if it depends on a funded position, an organizational contract, or a defined service period.

The system should be clear about what it can provide.

A false promise of permanent availability would reproduce the very instability the intervention is intended to reduce.

Continuity requires honest expectations as well as ongoing access.

The sixth requirement is that information follow the young adult without placing the young adult under permanent observation.

Administrative coordination can become a source of protection.

It can also become a source of intrusion.

A system that gathers educational, housing, employment, financial, health, and child-welfare records into one permanent file would create significant privacy and governance questions.

Those questions are particularly important for people whose childhood experiences already involved substantial institutional documentation.

The purpose of continuity is not to construct a comprehensive record of the person's private adult life.

It is to reduce the burden of repeatedly establishing information needed for specific services.

A more limited approach would permit the young adult to authorize the transfer of relevant information between providers.

The records shared should correspond to the assistance requested.

A receiving university may need confirmation of eligibility for a foster-youth support program.

It does not necessarily need the full history of the student's childhood placements.

A housing provider may need information establishing eligibility and current housing circumstances.

It does not necessarily need academic transcripts or unrelated personal records.

An employment adviser may need educational credentials and work history.

It does not need unrestricted access to medical or child-welfare files.

The principle is controlled continuity.

The person should not have to reproduce information already established when lawful and authorized sharing can solve the problem.

But administrative convenience should not become a justification for unnecessary disclosure.

This would require clear consent procedures, purpose limitations, security standards, correction rights, and defined retention practices.

Some data sharing would remain restricted by federal or state law.

A policy built around continuity would have to operate within those protections or obtain explicit legal authority for carefully limited changes.

Nor should participation in a voluntary transition program become an automatic condition for access to unrelated legal rights.

A young adult who declines a navigator should not lose Medicaid coverage for which they otherwise qualify.

A student who refuses unnecessary data sharing should not be presumed ineligible for financial aid.

And a person who requests emergency assistance should not have to surrender broad control over personal information as the price of being helped.

The system should make assistance easier to obtain without making the individual more vulnerable to institutional control.

That is an essential part of continuity without custody.

The seventh requirement concerns the relationship between available funding and actual assistance.

The institutional problem cannot be reduced to the assertion that governments simply need to appropriate more money.

Additional resources may be necessary.

Housing is expensive.

Intensive case management requires personnel.

Educational support involves real operating costs.

And a program that reaches more young people may require increased funding even if it becomes administratively more efficient.

But the available evidence also demonstrates that funding authorization does not guarantee service delivery.

A January 2025 Government Accountability Office investigation examined federal Chafee funds and Education and Training Voucher funds returned by states.

For fiscal year 2022, GAO found that twelve of fifty-one jurisdictions returned general Chafee funds, while twenty-eight returned education-voucher funds.

The combined returned amount was approximately $8.9 million.

Returned funds were not necessarily lost to the federal program. The Administration for Children and Families could reallocate unused funds to other eligible jurisdictions. After that process, approximately $670,000 in federal Chafee funding ultimately remained unused and was returned to the U.S. Treasury for fiscal year 2022, according to GAO (Government Accountability Office, 2025a).

GAO also found that some states continued to report unmet needs among the young people these programs were intended to serve.

The report did not establish that the returned funds would have been sufficient to meet every unmet need.

Nor did it demonstrate that states intentionally withheld assistance.

States may face administrative requirements, staffing constraints, eligibility problems, difficulties reaching participants, or other barriers to using appropriated funds.

But the finding reveals an institutional inefficiency.

Resources authorized for transition assistance were not always converted into services, even when needs remained.

The problem was not necessarily the absence of money.

It could arise in the system responsible for turning funding into assistance.

GAO recommended that the Department of Health and Human Services document a plan for its regional offices to work with states, Tribes, and U.S. territories to identify barriers to fully using available Chafee funding, including guidance on how regional staff should help jurisdictions address those barriers (Government Accountability Office, 2025a).

This finding connects directly to the missing denominator examined in Section 5.

A program can possess funding.

Young people can remain eligible.

Needs can remain unmet.

And the institution can still return part of the available money.

That sequence demonstrates why appropriations alone are an incomplete measure of public commitment.

The relevant question is what the resources reach.

A continuity-oriented system would therefore evaluate not only annual spending but the process through which assistance becomes accessible.

How many eligible young people were contacted?

How many requested assistance?

How many received it?

How long did delivery require?

How many applications failed because of incomplete documentation?

How many referrals resulted in completed services?

How many young adults returned after an interruption?

And how many continued to experience unmet needs despite available funding?

These measures do not eliminate the need for financial accountability.

They strengthen it.

An institution should be able to demonstrate how public money moved from authorization through delivery toward the intended outcome.

That is especially important when the public system contains multiple agencies.

One organization may possess an appropriation.

Another may identify the young person.

A third may deliver the service.

Without clear responsibility for the connection, the existence of all three does not establish that the young person receives assistance.

Continuity therefore requires an accountable delivery pathway.

Not merely an authorized benefit.

The eighth requirement is to measure success across the transition rather than within only one program.

The missing denominator cannot be solved by creating another program that reports only its own participants.

A new continuity arrangement would need to be evaluated against the population it is intended to serve.

That population must be defined before the program begins.

It may include young people approaching an age-related exit from care, former foster youth within specified age ranges, or other groups with relevant child-welfare histories.

The definition should correspond to the policy's objective and legal authority.

It should not be selected after outcomes are observed.

The evaluation must then preserve a distinction between eligibility, invitation, participation, service receipt, and outcome.

Not everyone will choose to participate.

Some individuals may already possess adequate support.

Others may prefer not to maintain contact with public institutions.

The decision to decline assistance should not automatically be recorded as an unsuccessful transition.

At the same time, evaluation cannot rely only on the people who remain actively engaged with the program.

That would reproduce the selection problem identified in the economic evidence.

Successful participants may differ from those who never enroll or leave early.

A credible evaluation must retain a broader reference population and distinguish the intervention's reach from its effects.

The outcomes should also be multidimensional.

Educational enrollment and completion matter.

So do employment, earnings, housing stability, access to healthcare, and the ability to manage ordinary adult responsibilities.

But no single measure should become the universal definition of successful adulthood.

A person earning a stable income without attending college may have achieved the appropriate outcome for their circumstances.

A young adult completing a degree while receiving housing assistance may be making significant progress toward independence.

A person who pauses education to care for a child may be exercising adult responsibility rather than abandoning it.

The evaluation should therefore distinguish the person's stated objectives from standard measures of institutional performance.

That does not mean abandoning measurable outcomes.

It means measuring them in context.

A more useful framework would examine five related dimensions:

Dimension	Principal evaluation question
Reach	What proportion of the defined eligible population was offered and received assistance?
Continuity	Did support remain accessible across exits, transfers, moves, and interruptions?
Adult agency	Did participants meaningfully direct their plans and retain control over voluntary assistance?
Outcomes	What changed in education, employment, housing, material stability, and other relevant areas?
Public cost	What additional resources were required, and which measurable fiscal or societal benefits followed?

These dimensions are complementary.

A program with strong participant outcomes but limited reach may be effective yet insufficiently accessible.

A program reaching most eligible young adults may still require improvement if participants experience poor outcomes.

A low-cost arrangement may perform well financially without providing meaningful assistance.

And a program with strong measured outcomes may impose an unacceptable degree of intrusion if it undermines the autonomy of the adults it serves.

The goal is not to maximize one statistic.

It is to establish whether the institutional arrangement produces dependable support under conditions consistent with adult independence.

That evaluation should also preserve the distinction between observed and causal effects developed in Section 8.

A person who uses a navigator and subsequently completes college has not necessarily completed college because of the navigator.

The evaluation must account for other differences between participants and nonparticipants.

Where feasible, phased implementation, randomized access to additional services, or credible comparison designs could help estimate the effect of a specific continuity intervention.

Evaluation should be designed into the program from the beginning.

It should not be reconstructed years later from the records that happen to remain.

These principles suggest a possible institutional model.

Before leaving care, the young person would have an opportunity to establish a voluntary relationship with a transition-support provider.

That relationship would identify the person's educational, employment, housing, and practical objectives.

It would also identify available supports, existing trusted relationships, and the circumstances under which the person might want to return for assistance.

The young adult would determine which forms of participation they wanted, subject to the requirements of the particular benefits being requested.

When foster-care supervision ended, the transition-support relationship could remain available within a defined eligibility period.

The provider would not automatically assume authority over the person's housing, employment, education, or private decisions.

Its principal responsibility would be access and coordination.

A person entering college could receive help connecting with campus support.

A person transferring institutions could receive assistance with the handoff.

Someone experiencing housing instability could be referred to an available program and helped through its application process.

A young adult returning to education could obtain guidance about financial aid, admissions, and existing eligibility.

And someone who no longer wanted assistance could disengage without being treated as having failed the transition.

The arrangement would require public funding, eligibility rules, trained staff, appropriate data-sharing authority, and clear accountability.

It would also require a determination of which existing organizations could perform the function.

The evidence does not establish that one national institution should administer it.

A state child-welfare agency might be well positioned to establish the initial relationship.

A community organization might be better positioned to maintain contact after the young adult leaves formal care.

A college might provide the most effective assistance while a student remains enrolled.

Different institutions might perform different functions.

The important feature would be an explicit responsibility for continuity between them.

That responsibility would need to be visible to the young adult.

A system should not promise continuing assistance without identifying who provides it, how to reach them, what they are authorized to do, and what happens when they cannot resolve the problem.

The model is therefore not merely a new counseling service.

It is an attempt to establish a dependable institutional connection across existing programs.

The minimum institutional correction proposed here is **accountable continuity across institutional handoffs**.

This would not make one organization responsible for guaranteeing college completion, employment, housing, or every subsequent adult outcome. It would establish responsibility for the connection between services that currently operate under separate authorities.

Four requirements would define that responsibility.

First, the young adult would have an identifiable point of contact for assistance during an institutional transition. The responsible provider would be known, accessible, and accountable for explaining the available options and helping the individual navigate them.

Second, a referral would not automatically be treated as a completed handoff. The process would distinguish between a service identified, a referral transmitted, a receiving organization contacted, and assistance actually obtained. Where the connection failed, the reason would be documented when available.

Third, the arrangement would preserve voluntary participation and adult decision-making. A young person could reduce or end active contact without automatically losing the ability to seek appropriate assistance again within the established eligibility period. Information sharing would remain limited to what was lawful, necessary, and authorized.

Fourth, accountability would extend beyond the people who successfully completed the transition. Evaluation would distinguish the eligible population, those reached, those receiving assistance, successful and unsuccessful handoffs, returns after interruption, and subsequent adult outcomes.

These requirements would not eliminate the independent responsibilities of colleges, housing authorities, child-welfare agencies, or other organizations.

They would identify a responsibility that can otherwise remain unassigned.

The completion of one institution's responsibility would no longer be treated as sufficient evidence that the transition to another institution had succeeded.

The objective would be to make continuity itself an observable and accountable function of the public system, without extending custody or removing the young adult's authority over their own decisions.

That proposal remains provisional.

The research reviewed in this paper does not establish the cost, staffing requirements, optimal duration, or causal effect of this particular arrangement.

Nor does it prove that a navigator alone can overcome shortages of affordable housing, limited educational capacity, labor-market constraints, or gaps in benefit eligibility.

Navigation cannot create a housing unit that does not exist.

It cannot make an unaffordable college affordable by explaining the application.

It cannot guarantee employment.

And it cannot replace the material assistance required for some young adults to remain stable.

A continuity model must therefore be evaluated in combination with the actual services available.

Where housing supply is the binding constraint, coordination alone may produce limited improvement.

Where benefits exist but remain unused, the first response should not automatically be additional case management. Some barriers may be addressed more directly through simplified applications, prepopulated records, clearer notifications, interagency eligibility verification, or automatic benefit activation where legal authority and applicable consent requirements permit. The Texas tuition-waiver experience examined in Section 5 illustrates why a formally available benefit should not be mistaken for a benefit successfully delivered (Watt & Faulkner, 2020; Watt et al., 2025).

Other failures arise not within a single program but at the boundary between institutions. A student transferring colleges may require one institution to recognize support or eligibility established through another. A young adult relocating between jurisdictions may encounter interruptions in benefits, referrals, or service delivery. A voluntary navigator can help resolve these problems, but navigation alone does not establish whether the receiving institution accepted responsibility, whether assistance was obtained, or what happens when the connection fails.

These approaches should therefore be distinguished rather than treated as competing universal solutions. Administrative simplification reduces unnecessary procedural burdens. Voluntary navigation provides individualized guidance where decisions or circumstances are complex. Accountable institutional handoffs establish responsibility for connections that cross organizational boundaries. Where students encounter credit-transfer inefficiency, changes to articulation agreements and academic policy may be more consequential than any additional navigation.

The appropriate intervention depends on the mechanism producing the difficulty. A pilot should identify that mechanism in advance and measure whether the proposed correction improves benefit uptake, time to assistance, completed handoffs, unresolved referrals, or continuity after interruption. Educational attainment, employment, earnings, and housing stability remain important longer-term outcomes, but the mixed educational results of intensive transition interventions reviewed in Section 8 provide no basis for assuming that improved coordination alone will increase degree completion.

That is why the evidence does not yet justify presenting one comprehensive national guarantee as a completed policy design.

The next step would be to identify specific transition failures, test whether better continuity changes them, and measure the cost of the improvement.

Different jurisdictions could evaluate different components.

A state might test voluntary post-care navigation.

A community-college system might test supported transfer into universities.

A housing authority and child-welfare agency might evaluate coordinated referral and rapid assistance.

A transition provider might test simplified reentry after interruption.

The evaluations could retain common outcome definitions while allowing implementation to reflect local conditions.

The results would establish whether particular mechanisms deserve expansion.

The principle of continuity can be articulated before the full program is specified.

The institutional design must still be earned through evidence.

There is also an important limit to the argument.

Not every former foster youth will need a continuing public support relationship.

Some will have dependable families.

Some will establish stable employment or housing quickly.

Some will prefer not to maintain contact with institutions associated with their childhood.

And some will encounter difficulties that require entirely different forms of assistance.

A system designed around the most vulnerable cases should not impose unnecessary supervision on the entire population.

Nor should the offer of assistance imply that the individual is incapable of becoming independent.

The point is precisely the opposite.

A young adult should be able to exercise independence without treating every use of support as a retreat from it.

That is a condition familiar to many people who have never experienced foster care.

They make decisions.

They accept assistance.

They change direction.

They recover from difficulties.

Their adulthood is not revoked when someone helps them.

The difference is that much of this assistance occurs through private relationships and resources outside formal public systems.

When those resources are unavailable, public institutions may need to provide a more dependable alternative for particular functions.

But they should do so without recreating the custodial conditions associated with childhood.

This is the distinction between protecting an adult's opportunity and directing an adult's life.

The former is the objective.

The latter is a risk that must be constrained.

Continuity without custody therefore does not mean permanent government presence.

It means the preservation of accessible support across the boundaries that ordinarily separate institutions and life stages.

It permits a young person to leave formal care without assuming that every need for assistance has ended.

It permits educational participation without requiring uninterrupted progress as proof of worthiness.

It permits a person to seek help after an unsuccessful attempt at independence without treating that attempt as disqualifying.

And it permits institutions to coordinate their responsibilities without claiming authority over every aspect of the individual's life.

The public system would remain bounded.

The young adult would remain autonomous.

The transition would become less dependent on navigating those boundaries alone.

That is the institutional correction suggested by the evidence.

The United States has spent decades expanding educational opportunity and developing assistance for young people leaving foster care.

Much of that assistance has been meaningful.

But the larger system has often measured the existence of programs, the delivery of services, and the completion of administrative transitions more readily than it has measured the continuity of adult opportunity.

The unfinished task is not simply to keep young people in care longer.

It is to make leaving care less likely to sever access to the resources, relationships, and institutional guidance needed for independent adulthood.

This would not eliminate every educational disparity.

It would not guarantee a degree, a career, or financial security.

And it would not establish that every additional public expenditure produces a positive fiscal return.

It would address a narrower structural problem.

A young person's opportunity should not repeatedly depend on whether an institution still considers that person its responsibility.

That is the meaning of continuity without custody.

The purpose of public care is not to preserve dependence.

It is to make independence possible.

And a dependable pathway into adulthood should not disappear at the moment the young person begins to use it.

10. Invisible

The children were not unknown.

They appeared in public records.

They were counted by child-welfare agencies, assigned to placements, represented in court proceedings, enrolled in schools, and identified in eligibility systems.

As they approached adulthood, some received independent-living services, financial assistance, educational vouchers, transition plans, and specialized support.

Researchers studied their outcomes.

Legislators responded to their circumstances.

Universities developed programs intended to improve their opportunities.

The problem examined in this paper was not the complete absence of institutional recognition.

It was the difference between being recognized by institutions and having a dependable pathway through them.

That difference gives *Invisible* its central meaning.

A young person can be visible to every institution encountered during childhood and still become difficult to follow across the transition into adulthood.

A program can recognize eligibility without establishing participation.

A college can recognize enrollment without ensuring that the conditions necessary for completion remain available.

An agency can recognize the end of its responsibility without establishing that another institution has assumed the support the young person still requires.

Each administrative event can be documented.

The developmental transition may remain unfinished.

This is not invisibility in the literal sense.

It is **institutional invisibility**: a condition in which the individual is visible within particular administrative systems, but the continuity of their development is not fully represented by the responsibilities and measurements of those systems.

The distinction is especially consequential for young people who experienced foster care because the government had already assumed a formal role in their childhood.

That role created a public relationship different from the one ordinarily existing between a young person and an educational institution.

The state did not merely offer a service that a family might choose to use.

It assumed responsibility for protection and welfare under circumstances in which the child's existing family arrangement could not safely continue as it had.

The responsibilities of child welfare are defined by law and do not automatically create an unlimited obligation to finance every subsequent stage of adulthood.

But the public relationship makes the transition from care into independence a legitimate subject of institutional accountability.

The state has reason to examine whether the systems it operates leave young people with a realistic opportunity to develop independent lives.

During Pax Academia, higher education became an increasingly prominent pathway to economic opportunity.

But pursuing that opportunity required more than admission. Students needed housing, financial stability, guidance, and the capacity to recover when circumstances changed.

For young people emerging from foster care, those resources could not be assumed.

The public response was substantial.

Congress expanded independent-living assistance, established education and training vouchers, revised financial-aid rules, and authorized new options for extended foster care. Colleges and universities developed specialized support programs.

These responses emerged while the educational promise was expanding.

But the programs remained distributed across institutions with different responsibilities, eligibility requirements, and measures of success.

The 2004 Government Accountability Office review documented the resulting difficulties. States had expanded independent-living assistance, but reported service coverage varied substantially, coordination remained inconsistent, and information about longer-term outcomes was incomplete (Government Accountability Office, 2004).

Recognition was not the same as comprehensive reach.

The existence of services did not establish reliable participation.

And the completion of administrative responsibilities did not demonstrate durable adult independence.

Those distinctions persisted in later research.

The first form of invisibility concerns the population outside an institution's field of measurement.

A program can accurately describe its participants without establishing what happened to the broader population it was intended to help.

The Texas cohort examined earlier provides a concrete example.

Among 11,251 young people with foster-care experience who turned eighteen in 2019, 2,794 entered higher education during the four-year observation period. Of those who enrolled, 542 obtained a postsecondary credential (Watt et al., 2025).

These are outcomes for a defined cohort, not national lifetime attainment rates.

But the distinction between the populations matters.

A university can measure enrollment and completion among its students. A specialized support program can measure the progress of its participants.

Neither can independently account for the educational trajectory of the entire original population.

That does not diminish the accomplishments of effective programs.

It identifies the difference between improving outcomes for the people an institution serves and determining whether the broader population is benefiting.

Program success and population success are related, but they are not interchangeable.

The original population remains relevant even after individual institutions have completed their responsibilities.

Its members may pursue different educational and employment pathways. Some may receive substantial assistance, while others never enter the programs established to support them.

Unfavorable outcomes cannot automatically be attributed to institutional failure, and missing observations cannot be treated as evidence of unsuccessful adulthood.

But a complete assessment must distinguish barriers before program entry, outcomes during participation, and interruptions occurring at or after institutional exits.

Improvement at one stage should not be mistaken for resolution of the entire transition.

The second form of invisibility concerns the support that institutions do not ordinarily measure.

The invisible family does not describe one preferred family structure or assume that foster-experienced young people lack meaningful personal relationships.

It identifies forms of assistance that often remain outside institutional measurements.

Housing between semesters.

Emergency financial support.

Practical guidance.

Transportation.

And the opportunity to recover from an unsuccessful decision without losing the conditions necessary to try again.

These resources can provide what this paper has described as family reserve capacity: support whose value lies partly in its continued availability, even when it is not being used.

For young people without comparable resources, an ordinary interruption can have more consequential effects.

A failed semester can threaten housing. Housing instability can interfere with employment. The loss of employment can make returning to education more difficult.

The original difficulty may be temporary.

The resulting disruption may not be.

But the distinction extends beyond material assistance.

For many Americans, continuing to receive support from family is an ordinary feature of adulthood.

A student living with parents is not necessarily considered incapable of independence.

A worker receiving advice from relatives does not surrender authority over employment decisions.

An adult returning home after losing a job does not become a child again.

Yet comparable assistance delivered through public programs often involves formal eligibility classifications, reporting requirements, and administrative limits.

Some of those requirements are necessary. Public resources must be administered lawfully and within defined responsibilities.

But their existence raises a broader institutional question.

The institutional question is whether public assistance can preserve adult capability without making ordinary adult decision-making conditional on continued supervision.

Family relationships and public programs cannot be made identical.

They need not be.

The relevant distinction is between the source of support and the adult capability that support helps preserve.

The public system should therefore distinguish the legitimate objective of adult independence from the narrower administrative objective of ending program participation.

The two may coincide.

They do not necessarily coincide.

A young person can leave a program because assistance is no longer needed.

A young person can also leave because eligibility has expired.

Those are different outcomes.

The institution records the exit.

The meaning of the exit depends on what follows.

The third form of invisibility is therefore temporal.

Public institutions operate through defined periods.

Child-welfare supervision has legal boundaries. Educational assistance, housing programs, and case-management relationships each have conditions governing their duration and continuation.

Adult development does not necessarily follow those timelines.

Reforms since Pax Academia have extended important forms of assistance.

Some states permit foster care to continue through age twenty-one. Education and Training Vouchers can remain available into the twenties. Certain housing programs serve young adults after care, and qualifying former foster youth may retain Medicaid coverage until age twenty-six.

These arrangements recognize that the need for assistance may continue after formal custody ends.

But they operate under different eligibility requirements and timelines.

A young adult may retain healthcare after leaving extended care.

Continue education after housing assistance expires.

Or encounter a serious disruption after an educational support relationship has ended.

These circumstances do not establish that every young adult requires continuous public assistance or that every program should operate indefinitely.

They identify a different problem.

The system of exits is not simply a collection of age limits. It is the possibility that one institution's responsibility ends before another institution's assistance becomes available.

Each institution may record the lawful completion of its responsibility without measuring the consequences of the transition that follows.

The resulting gap may be temporary.

Its consequences for education, housing, employment, or financial stability may last much longer.

The fourth form of invisibility is economic.

Public expenditure is usually visible to the institution responsible for it.

An agency can identify its appropriations, operating costs, and authorized services.

But the benefits of a successful transition may appear elsewhere.

A young adult may earn more through sustained employment.

Government may collect additional revenue.

Stable housing may reduce emergency needs.

And improved circumstances may benefit families, employers, and future generations.

Those outcomes can occur across institutions and over periods extending well beyond the original intervention.

The organization financing assistance may therefore bear an immediate, identifiable cost without recording the full value of the outcomes that follow.

The cost of continuity can be institutionally concentrated while its benefits are distributed.

That distinction matters for public investment.

But distributed benefits do not establish that every intervention will produce a positive return.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy's 2020 evaluation illustrates both the potential and the uncertainty.

Its model estimated $75,529 in lifetime societal benefits against $19,113 in incremental extended-care costs per participant, measured in 2019 dollars (Miller, Bales, and Hirsch, 2020).

The projected taxpayer return was more sensitive to the assumptions underlying those benefits.

Excluding modeled intergenerational effects reduced the illustrative net fiscal benefit to approximately $1,160 per participant. Excluding crime-related government savings as well produced a modeled fiscal loss.

Those calculations do not invalidate the underlying benefits.

They demonstrate that societal value and fiscal return are different measures, and that projected returns depend on which effects are included.

Evidence from other transition interventions also shows that improvements in employment, housing, and education do not necessarily occur together.

The economic case therefore cannot be reduced to a universal benefit-cost multiplier.

Some interventions may produce substantial social benefits.

Some may also generate positive fiscal returns.

Others may improve individual well-being while imposing a continuing net public cost.

That last possibility does not automatically make them undesirable.

Public institutions provide legitimate services because of the protections and opportunities they create, not solely because recipients may eventually generate additional tax revenue.

Foster care itself is one of those services.

Its purpose is not to purchase a future taxpayer.

Its purpose is to protect a child.

The economic question developed in this paper is whether avoidable institutional discontinuities diminish opportunities that appropriately designed transition assistance could help preserve.

That question can be evaluated without assigning a financial value to the worth of the individual.

It can also be evaluated without presenting projected benefits as established outcomes.

The unfinished investment is not the child.

It is the institutional opportunity to improve the transition from public care into adulthood.

That distinction should govern how any future program is evaluated.

The fifth form of invisibility concerns responsibility.

An institution can fulfill its assigned obligations while leaving a larger developmental need unresolved.

A child-welfare agency can complete a required transition plan.

A college can provide admission.

A financial-aid office can approve assistance.

A housing program can determine eligibility.

Each action may be legitimate and useful.

But none independently establishes that the young person can move reliably between those arrangements.

Institutional success does not automatically produce system success.

This is the central finding connecting the preceding sections.

The weakness need not originate in an institution failing to perform its assigned function.

It can emerge between otherwise functioning programs.

A young person may qualify for assistance without receiving it.

May complete coursework without having every credit advance the intended degree.

May leave care with a transition plan but encounter circumstances that the plan cannot resolve.

Or may complete one program before another becomes available.

These are different problems.

They cannot all be corrected through the same intervention.

But they share a structural feature.

The institution measures its responsibility.

The young person experiences the transition between responsibilities.

Where dependable family or private support exists, those relationships may help bridge the gap.

Where comparable resources are unavailable, the consequences of an institutional boundary can become more severe.

This is why the paper proposes continuity without custody.

The principle does not require permanent foster-care participation, indefinite public supervision, or an institution empowered to determine the appropriate course of a young adult's life.

It asks whether appropriate assistance can remain accessible as formal custody ends and circumstances change.

But continuity cannot be achieved through coordination alone.

Where the obstacle is administrative access, better referrals, information sharing, or navigation may be useful.

Where the obstacle is insufficient housing, financial resources, or educational capacity, additional material support or changes in institutional policy may be necessary.

A navigator cannot create an available apartment.

A transition plan cannot guarantee employment.

And improved communication cannot independently resolve every barrier to educational completion.

The appropriate response depends on the problem being addressed.

That distinction also matters for accountability.

A new intervention should not be evaluated solely through the number of people it enrolls or the services it delivers.

Evaluation must distinguish the eligible population, the people reached, the assistance actually received, and the outcomes that follow.

It must also examine institutional exits, interruptions, and those who never participate.

Otherwise, an intervention intended to correct the missing denominator may reproduce the same measurement problem.

A system-level evaluation must therefore examine what happens between services, not only what each institution reports.

That responsibility must coexist with adult autonomy.

Young people leaving foster care will pursue different educational, employment, family, and personal pathways.

Some will require substantial assistance.

Others will need comparatively little.

An unfavorable outcome does not automatically establish institutional failure, and a successful adult life cannot be reduced to one educational credential or economic measure.

The objective is not to eliminate uncertainty from adulthood.

It is to identify and reduce avoidable institutional barriers that make ordinary transitions unnecessarily difficult.

This returns the analysis to the historical promise of Pax Academia.

Higher education became an increasingly prominent pathway into economic opportunity, but the ability to use that opportunity depended partly on resources outside the institutions offering it.

For many young adults, private relationships supplied some of those resources.

For young people emerging from foster care, their availability could not be assumed.

The public response was real. Governments recognized the disadvantage, developed assistance, and expanded opportunities.

But recognition did not necessarily establish continuity.

That is the paradox of *Invisible*.

The young people themselves were visible. Their circumstances were documented, their eligibility recognized, and programs established to assist them.

What remained less visible was the complete pathway connecting public responsibility during childhood to the practical conditions of independent adulthood.

What remained difficult to see was the distance between being cared for and being equipped to move forward.

Conclusion: The Promise Beyond Care

Pax Academia promised opportunity through education.

For young people emerging from foster care, the critical question was not simply whether educational opportunities existed, but whether they could be used and sustained after public care ended.

That difficulty was not ignored.

Governments expanded transition assistance. Colleges developed specialized support programs. Researchers documented the obstacles facing young adults leaving care.

Those responses mattered.

But the historical record establishes a distinction between recognizing a disadvantage and resolving the institutional conditions that sustain it.

Recognition of a developmental disadvantage did not necessarily produce an institutional arrangement capable of resolving it.

A young person can receive public protection during childhood, educational assistance during adolescence, and financial or housing support in early adulthood without experiencing those services as one dependable pathway.

Each institution may fulfill its responsibilities, operate within its legal authority, and accurately document the people it serves.

But the completion of those responsibilities does not necessarily establish that the young person has achieved durable adult independence.

The administrative record describes what institutions have done.

The developmental outcome concerns what the young person has been able to accomplish.

Those are related questions.

They are not the same question.

The difference becomes especially important when considering the role of family.

For many young adults, housing, financial assistance, practical guidance, and the ability to recover from setbacks remain available through family or other trusted relationships well beyond the age of legal adulthood.

Those resources are neither universal nor equally distributed.

But they can make formal educational opportunity usable.

For young people emerging from foster care, comparable support could not be assumed. Public institutions had recognized that ordinary family protection was insufficient or unsafe during childhood, yet the transition into adulthood could depend on continuing relationships and resources those institutions did not necessarily provide.

This was the contradiction beneath the educational promise.

Public care could protect a child without establishing comparable continuity of support as that child became an adult.

The consequence was not that every young person leaving foster care failed.

Many pursued education, established employment, built families, developed supportive relationships, and achieved meaningful independence.

Others followed different pathways that were equally legitimate.

The evidence does not describe one uniform population or one inevitable outcome.

But it documents substantial educational disparities, uneven access to assistance, and institutional transitions that could become difficult when dependable private resources were unavailable.

That is the distinction between **opportunity offered and opportunity made usable**.

Admission, benefit eligibility, and completed transition plans can represent meaningful institutional accomplishments without establishing that the resources necessary for continued progress remain available.

The question is therefore not simply how much assistance institutions provide.

It is whether that assistance reaches the people it is intended to serve, arrives when needed, and remains usable as institutional responsibilities change.

The economic evidence adds another dimension.

Transition assistance requires public expenditure. Its potential benefits may include stronger employment, greater housing stability, sustained educational participation, and reduced demands on other public systems.

Those benefits may emerge over time and across institutions.

The Washington State evaluation illustrates both the potential and uncertainty of those returns. Its modeled lifetime societal benefits exceeded the estimated additional cost of extended foster care, but the projected taxpayer return depended substantially on intergenerational outcomes and other assumptions.

Other evaluations identified improvements in employment or housing without corresponding increases in college completion.

The evidence therefore does not establish that every intervention will pay for itself or that additional assistance will improve every outcome.

It supports a more disciplined proposition.

The economic value of transition support depends on its design, the population it reaches, the outcomes it changes, and the durability of those changes.

Some benefits may return to government through additional revenue or avoided expenditure. Others may accrue primarily to the young person and the wider society.

These are different forms of value and should not be treated as interchangeable.

An effective intervention may improve adult opportunity without producing a positive fiscal return.

That is not a failure of the public purpose.

The obligation to protect children does not depend on their future earning potential.

But public institutions should still examine whether avoidable discontinuities impose costs while diminishing opportunities that earlier public commitments helped establish.

Human development is not justified solely by its financial return.

Public investments should nevertheless be evaluated for the outcomes they produce.

This perspective rejects two assumptions: that additional spending alone will resolve the problem, and that the end of formal custody necessarily marks the end of legitimate public responsibility.

The institutional direction proposed in this paper is **continuity without custody**.

The principle separates adult independence from the continuing accessibility of appropriate assistance.

A young person should be able to leave formal care while retaining a practical means of seeking educational guidance, housing support, and assistance after an interruption, without surrendering ordinary adult authority over personal decisions.

Existing arrangements already demonstrate parts of this approach.

Extended-care reentry, post-care housing assistance, continuing educational benefits, and Medicaid eligibility beyond foster-care supervision recognize that the need for support does not necessarily end when formal custody ends.

But separate protections do not automatically create a dependable pathway across institutions.

The remaining policy question is how to make that continuity more reliable without turning assistance into continuing supervision.

That question requires experimentation and evidence.

Voluntary transition navigation, coordinated educational transfers, simplified access to existing benefits, and mechanisms for returning to assistance after an interruption offer possible directions for evaluation.

The research examined in this paper does not establish that any one arrangement is the optimal national solution.

But it identifies the institutional condition that any proposed arrangement must address.

Responsibility for a developmental transition cannot be fully evaluated through the isolated activities of the institutions participating in it.

The transition itself must become an object of public accountability.

That means evaluating not only the outcomes of program participants, but also whom assistance reaches, whom it misses, and whether support remains accessible across institutional boundaries.

It also means preserving young adults' authority to make their own decisions, including the decision to pursue different educational, employment, and personal pathways.

The objective is not to engineer one model of successful adulthood.

It is to reduce avoidable institutional barriers to pursuing a viable adult life.

Pax Academia was built around the conviction that education could help Americans move toward a better future.

For young people emerging from foster care, that promise exposed a fundamental limitation.

Opportunity requires more than an available institution.

It requires the conditions under which a person can make use of what the institution offers.

A college can open its doors.

But the student must still reach them, remain enrolled, and have somewhere to live when the semester ends.

For many young adults, family and private relationships help bridge those demands. For young people whose childhoods involved public care, comparable support could not be assumed.

That does not mean government must become a permanent substitute parent.

It means the public system must recognize the importance of the transition it has helped create.

The United States has demonstrated a willingness to assume responsibility for children whose circumstances require public protection.

It has also demonstrated a commitment to education as a pathway to opportunity.

The unfinished task is to connect those commitments.

Not by preserving childhood.

Not by making independence conditional on continuous supervision.

And not by measuring a young adult's value through future public revenue.

But by ensuring that the end of public care does not unnecessarily diminish the opportunities for which that child was being prepared.

The historical problem was not that nobody knew these young people existed.

It was that recognition did not always produce continuity.

The state can close a case. It cannot make adulthood begin on schedule.

Methods and Limitations

This paper is a historical and institutional analysis of educational opportunity and the transition to adulthood among young people with experience in the United States foster-care system.

The analysis combines historical policy development, published educational outcomes, state and federal program documentation, institutional case studies, and evaluations of transition-support interventions. Its central concern is the relationship between formal educational access, continuity of support, and longer-term adult outcomes.

Historical Framework

The term *Pax Academia* is used as an interpretive designation for approximately 1990 through 2010, when postsecondary education acquired growing authority as a pathway to economic opportunity and national competitiveness.

The term does not describe a formally recognized historical period or imply that educational access, affordability, or attainment was uniform during those years.

Evidence published after 2010 is used to examine the institutional legacy of the period, not as direct evidence that the same outcomes occurred during the historical period itself.

Population and Outcome Measures

The paper distinguishes between young people currently in foster care, those aging out of care, and broader populations with foster-care experience.

These populations are not interchangeable.

Educational outcomes are evaluated with attention to cohort definitions, observation periods, enrollment, persistence, transfer, credential attainment, and the denominators used to report results.

Program participation and participant success rates are not treated as substitutes for outcomes across an entire eligible or foster-experienced population.

Economic Analysis

The economic analysis examines the incremental costs and potential benefits of transition-support interventions.

It distinguishes direct program expenditure, individual earnings, broader societal benefits, government revenue, and avoided public costs.

Published benefit-cost estimates are evaluated according to their underlying assumptions, observation periods, causal methods, discounting, and treatment of projected future outcomes.

Illustrative sensitivity calculations do not establish the actual return of a proposed national intervention.

Analytical Limitations

Evidence from individual states and programs cannot automatically establish national outcomes.

Differences in eligibility, program design, participation, local economic conditions, and measurement periods limit direct comparison.

Observational associations between program participation and improved outcomes do not necessarily establish that the program caused those improvements.

The paper does not assume that every intervention produces a positive fiscal return, that higher education is the only legitimate pathway to adulthood, or that a person's social value depends on their eventual fiscal contribution.

Its purpose is to examine an institutional discontinuity and the conditions under which more dependable transition support could improve adult outcomes.

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About Jellen Protocol Lab

Jellen Protocol Lab is an independent research practice focused on protocol design, institutional systems, and public infrastructure. The Lab develops research frameworks, technical specifications, registries, simulations, and reference models intended to make complex systems more legible, inspectable, and actionable.

Version Notes

v1.0 — Initial Publication

Initial publication of *Invisible — Left Behind in Pax Academia*.

Examines educational opportunity and the transition to adulthood among young people with foster-care experience, with particular attention to informal family support and discontinuities between public institutions.

Develops Pax Academia as a historical framework and *continuity without custody* as a proposed institutional principle, supported by educational, policy, and economic evidence.

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