Foster(ing) Youth in the California State University

Understanding the Vital Role of Campus Support Programs

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Executive Summary
The UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) in the School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA worked collaboratively with advisers from John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY); the California State University (CSU) Chancellor’s Office; and faculty from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, to conduct this research study.

With the generous support of the Stuart Foundation and UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children & Families, the research team sought to understand the impact of campus support programs for foster youth and the successes, challenges, and opportunities experienced by their staff in the CSU system.

California has long been considered a champion for its support for youth who experience foster care, and is particularly noteworthy regarding creating campus-based programs to support these young people’s postsecondary education. For this study, we engaged with 23 staff members from across the CSU system to develop a deep understanding of high-impact practices. Research findings are used to develop actionable recommendations at the campus, system, state, and federal levels. We hope this study will be used to encourage greater investment in college campus support programs for foster youth.

**Appropriate Citation**

The Child Welfare and Foster Care Systems

California has the largest foster care population in the nation, with 50,737 young people in foster care (AFCARS, 2022). In 2021, 22,892 young people entered California’s foster care system, and 24,199 foster youth exited the system. Foster youth are a unique population who traverse visible and invisible barriers in the child welfare, education, and criminal justice systems (Harvey et al., 2021; Kolivoski et al., 2017; Roberts, 2022). Students who experience foster care are more likely to be disproportionately impacted by mental health, homelessness, and juvenile incarceration (Courtney et al., 2020; Piel, 2018). By struggling to navigate these barriers, foster youth are often tracked out of secondary and postsecondary education.

Access and Persistence to Higher Education

Compared to their first-generation and low-income college student peers, foster youth face a set of different obstacles (JBAY, 2022). Foster youth face significant structural challenges across multiple systems, which hinder their college education (Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Watt et al., 2018). Some of these obstacles include, but are not limited to: accrued trauma; attending under-resourced schools; educational instability; lack of a financial safety net, and food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Lee, 2016; Miller et al., 2017; Sandh et al., 2020).

The primary postsecondary educational pathway for foster youth is through community college (Havlicek et al., 2021; JBAY, 2022), however, foster youth can spend more than six years at a community college before enrolling at a four-year college or university (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009; Piel, 2018). A study on foster youth found only 3.6% of foster youth earned a four-year degree by age 26 (Courtney et al., 2009).

Foster Youth Campus Support Programs

The structural barriers that have harmed foster youth pursuing their education for decades led to the first campus support program at CSU Fullerton in 1998 with just three students. Since then, the program has served over 100 foster youth, helping to remove educational barriers for foster youth and supporting them along their educational journeys. Foster youth campus support programs across the CSU system and the nation vary in their services, staffing, and number of students, yet their overall mission is the same: to support the diverse needs and unique challenges of students who experienced foster care as they move toward college graduation (Geiger et al., 2018).
Five themes emerged from our analysis of the survey and interview data that highlight how campus support programs provide holistic support for students, and also reveal the challenges staff face in their work while still demonstrating dedication to supporting foster youth.

**Foster youth campus support programs deliver critical advising services that meet students’ needs.**

Campus support programs provide intentional advising, mentoring, and warm introductions and handoffs to other student service departments. Through these networks of support, the programs provide different forms of navigational, financial, and social capital (Yosso, 2005) for their students. Staff shared the importance of providing holistic, wraparound support; building trust and rapport through relationships; being culturally competent; and being trauma informed.

You must have a program willing to focus on building healthy, trusting relationships with students. It cannot be a pure financial aid service or a referral service. The program must implement strategies to welcome students, inform and empower students to navigate their college experience, and hold students accountable who do not meet minimum requirements of the program to secure scholarships. An active community of students can trust each other, support each other, and hold each other accountable to be the best versions of themselves. -Staff member

**Educational and social/cultural programming and case management are common practices that exemplify quality and equity across campus support programs.**

Across the survey and interviews, campus support program personnel mentioned several services and supports that were integral to foster youth campus support programs. These include scholarships, housing, mental health resources, and pre-college programming (e.g., summer bridge).

Of the 23 survey respondents, 20 said that case management is very important as it relates to important programmatic elements of a campus support program. Case managers serve as a trained professional for students in connecting them...
with campus and community systems that can help them (Adams et al., 2014). Case managers are useful when helping students with their academic, personal, physical and mental health needs (Adams et al., 2014). They are often trained in areas that student affairs professionals are not, and can provide unique and at times life-saving tools for students.

In the survey, all of the staff surveyed reported educational programming and social/cultural programming as both very important. Programming often includes activities, workshops, and events that are facilitated toward student development (De Sisto et al., 2022; Hass et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2017). Educational programming introduced students to financial literacy, healthy relationships, mental health, Cal-Fresh enrollment, and leadership principles through workshops and retreats. Social/cultural programming included attending theater performances, the beach, museums, movie theaters, bowling alleys, and celebrating students’ birthdays and graduation ceremonies. These educational and cultural experiences are important as youth from foster care backgrounds are often not typically provided to them while in foster care and struggle to financially afford them on their own when in college.

I remember one student wanted to celebrate their birthday, but they didn’t know how to celebrate birthdays. I saw that, and right away, I was like, ‘OK, we need to tie this to our programming’. We also started end of the year celebrations; I was like, ‘we need to acknowledge our graduates.’ -Staff member
Financial support for foster youth students and campus support programs is inadequate.

The foster care system under-prepares youth for life after emancipation, as mentioned above housing and food insecurity are persistent challenges they navigate. There were two major themes that staff articulated: financial aid, and the historical underfunding of campus support programs themselves.

Staff narratives recount how students struggle to pay for their education. Of the 23 staff we surveyed, 21 said that helping students to navigate funding their education was somewhat to very challenging.

There’s just so much that goes into this work. Their schools have not really prepared them for college. I don’t feel like the university really supports them. I try to communicate with my leadership how we need more support. I mean AB12 isn’t enough. If it weren’t for our program I am not sure how our campus would actually support foster youth. -Staff member

Staff members spoke about how the financial aid formula disadvantages foster students. In the survey, all 23 staff members said the current financial aid structure does not meet the needs of foster youth.

Each student has a maximum cost of attendance, and once that’s reached, it’s very hard to provide additional support to a student who may need it without having their aid readjusted. We continue running into an issue with that…That cost of attendance piece would really be something I think that we’d be able to utilize and to be able to really support the program. -Staff member

Trust and support must be strengthened between campus support program staff and campus leadership.

Many of the staff members interviewed felt as though their institutions did not have the adequate infrastructure to support them in their work. Staff reported that their campus practices and leadership were not supportive and often stigmatized students. In the survey, they used words like “lack of support and understanding of administration,” “red tape,” and “bureaucratic campus policies.”

There seems to be [a lack of trust] and I feel like it has been like this for a very long time… I would love to see people on a campus not painting current and former foster youth with a brush of their own design, but rather, listening to the people who work with the students, listening to the students themselves, and seeing them as not just a hard luck case. -Staff member

Our relationship with our leadership? We don’t really have one, they show up when it’s time to cut a check or when we have a donor on campus. But they don’t really support our work. -Staff member

The lack of trust between administration and campus support staff also creates low morale and high staff turnover (Neal, 2017; Ruthkosky, 2013), which is problematic as stability and consistency are important when working with vulnerable student populations.
Foster youth support programs measure success beyond graduation and retention statistics.

Staff did not measure “success” in the same way as their campus administrators (who typically measure success through retention and graduation statistics); instead, staff used a holistic approach. When asked “how do you measure success?” Staff by and large expressed how meeting their students’ well-being and basic needs was a major factor of success for the program. Staff also identified measurements of program success as providing advising, emotional and financial support, and building relationships with students.

Immediately, I’m just thinking about well-being. When I think about measuring a student’s success, it’s always to provide a foundation. It’s essential when serving foster youth to have stability, not just with basic needs, but the relationships that they will develop on campus, academic success follows. So when you say measurement... we approach students from a human level, then the traditional model for success under [higher education] would be retention and graduation.

-Staff member
Implications for Policy and Practice

**CSU System**

01 **Remove all age restrictions for campus support programs.** Because the foster care system under-prepares students to attend college, by the time they reach a four-year university, they have often aged out of certain entitlement programs. Regardless of age, students with a documented history of foster care should be able to access services and support.

02 **Create a foster youth transition pathway program (e.g., EOP summer bridge).** Summer bridge programs at colleges and universities help to support students’ transition into the university setting. Some programs allow students to take courses before classes start, where they can meet other incoming students and build relationships with staff and faculty.

03 **Invest in professional development consortiums for staff that support foster youth to improve and share best practices.** For over a decade, student affairs professionals in the CSU system have collaborated with college personnel from the University of California and California community college systems in formal non-sponsored regional meetings across the state. Investing in these consortiums that have functioned without funding would surely boost the professional development of the staff.

SDSU Guardian Scholars hold up posters created during a coping strategy activity facilitated by Guardian Scholars wellness coaches at a monthly meeting. (Image credit: SDSU Guardian Scholars Program)
### Implications for Policy and Practice

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Many students exit foster care with little to no family or financial support when preparing for college and adulthood. It would be advantageous to invest in families impacted by foster care toward making families healed and whole.

| **05** | Increase Chafee Grant funding and the age limit at which students can access these grants. |

Research shows that foster youth lack financial safety nets, making attending college more difficult. Also, because of the ways in which the foster care system sets young people back in their education, increasing the funding and age limit would create more equitable access.

| **06** | Create systems to track college outcomes of foster youth in the CSU, UC, and CCC systems. |

Little is understood about college enrollment and graduation rates of foster youth across California. As we continue to invest more funding into campus support programs, it is important to identify which students participated in a campus support program and track their postsecondary outcomes.

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CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars at a graduation & recognition ceremony (Image credit: CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars Program)
Recent reports show that students who experience foster care are disproportionately impacted by satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policies (JBAY, 2022). Removing SAP requirements would create equity and inclusion for this population as they pursue a postsecondary degree.

Research is emerging that shows that foster youth are less likely to have financial protective factors, which makes attending college more expensive compared to their non-foster youth peers (Tucker et al., 2023). Even for students who maximize their financial aid budget through free aid, like grants and scholarships, they still need to work to pay for their college education and cost of living.

We have little data on the college enrollment and graduation rates of foster youth across the country. A national database would permit the identification of trends over time and analysis of data in a disaggregated manner to determine which groups of students need greater attention and focus and better inform funding decisions.

Due to the lack of family and financial safety nets, foster youth are forced to take out loans to support them through college. To level the playing field and create equity for an incredibly disenfranchised population, we recommend complete loan forgiveness for students who experienced foster care.
Conclusion

Campus support programs provide students who participate in their programs with highly skilled educational and personal support, financial and emotional safety nets, and a community of care. Campus support programs and the staff who run them go above and beyond to serve students. In many ways, the staff are compensating for the ways in which multiple systems have failed the students in preparing them for college and life after foster care. Many of the staff interviewed expressed how they want to do more, but funding constraints and campus bureaucracy limit their ability to do so.

This study highlights the need for reform within the foster care system to better prepare youth for postsecondary education. This unique population demonstrates immense resolve and resistance amid real and considerable challenges in the college setting, and thus requires significant support from campus-based programs. Campus support programs that serve different student populations can learn from the foster youth support programs in the California State University system; they are champions and models for how to support some of our most vulnerable students in postsecondary education. Although our study was limited to students and programs in California, it highlights how much more support students who have experienced foster care need when pursuing a postsecondary education in California and across the nation.