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Foster(ing) Youth in the California State University: Understanding the Vital Role of Campus Support Programs

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Authors

Whitman, Kenyon Lee

Espino, Maria Luz

Thompson, Demontea

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Foster(*ing*) Youth in the California State University

Understanding the Vital Role of Campus Support Programs



Kenyon Lee Whitman, Ph.D.
Maria Luz Espino, Ph.D.
Demontea Thompson, M.Ed.

School of Education & Information Studies
UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

Image credit: Cal Poly Pomona Renaissance Scholars Program

Table of Contents

01

Introduction

03

Students with Foster Care History

The Child Welfare and Foster Care Systems

Access and Persistence to Higher Education

Foster Youth Campus Support Programs

California Policy Enhancing California State University Enrollment for Foster Youth

10

Methodology

Site Selection

Participant Selection

Data Collection

Data Analysis

14

Key Findings

1. Support programs for foster youth deliver **critical advising services** that meet students' needs.
2. **Educational and social/cultural programming and case management** are common practices that exemplify quality and equity across campus support programs.
3. **Financial support is inadequate** for foster youth students and campus support programs.
4. **Trust and support must be strengthened** between program staff and campus leadership.
5. Foster youth support programs **measure success beyond graduation and retention statistics.**

34

Implications for Policy and Practice

37

Conclusion

38

References

Introduction

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Stuart Foundation



About the Study

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, 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 campus support programs for foster youth.

Appropriate Citation

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The Child Welfare and Foster Care Systems

There were over 391,000 young people in foster care in the United States on September 30, 2021 (*Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS], 2022*). 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. These obstacles must be addressed through intentional structural support, providing correct information, and adequate funding to meet the needs of children and families involved in the foster care system (*Cohn & Kelly, 2015; Lenz-Rashid, 2018*). These outcomes illustrate the magnitude of the foster youth population within California.

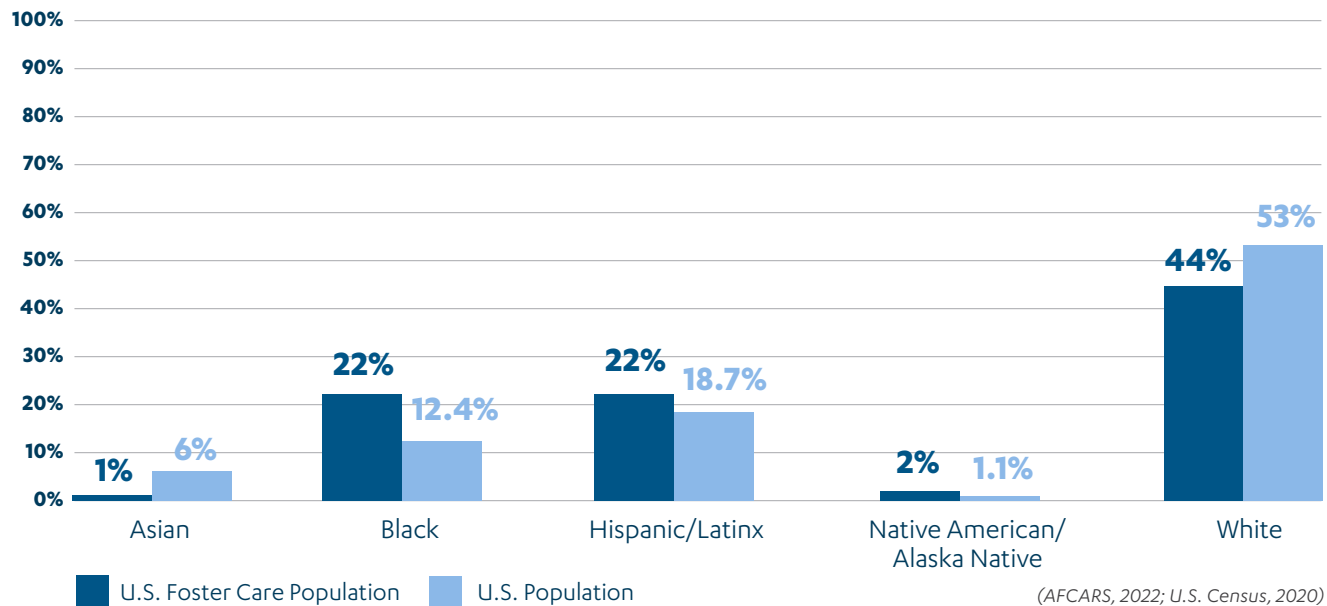


50,737
CA young people in foster care



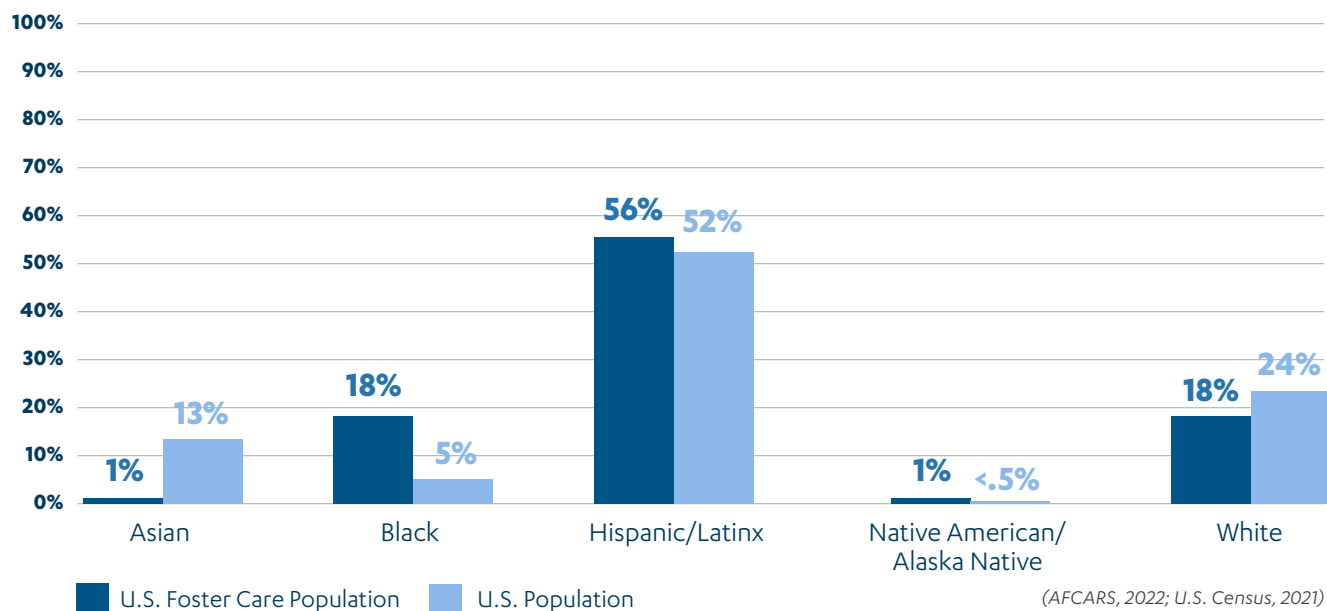
U.S. Data

Table 1. U.S. Census and Foster Care Population by Race and Ethnicity on September 30, 2021



California Data

Table 2. California Foster Care Population by Race and Ethnicity on June 28, 2022



Access and Persistence to Higher Education

Higher education has been used as a vehicle for students to achieve social mobility for themselves and their families (Ma & Pender, 2023). 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). Since Courtney and colleagues (2009) published this research, scholars have urged us to (re)focus on the 97% that are underserved and need the support to increase this number (see Day, 2023). These troubling postsecondary educational outcomes make campus support programs critical.

As to not reproduce deficit narratives about this population, it is important to state that their postsecondary outcomes are not because of the inabilities of students; but rather, the foster care and education systems' failures to prepare foster youth for college and life after emancipation from the foster care system (Day, 2023).



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 for foster youth at CSU Fullerton.

The Guardian Scholars Program at CSU Fullerton was established 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.

The CSU system is the largest postsecondary university system in the U.S. The CSU system plays an important role in supporting positive life outcomes for young people who have experienced foster care. Although the data is not publicly available from the CSU system, it is estimated that it enrolls roughly 3,000 to 3,500 students with a foster care history (JBAY, 2022).

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). These campus support programs are critical for recruiting, enrolling, and graduating foster youth (Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Watt et al., 2018).

While research on these programs is still emerging, we know that campus support programs and services are crucial for bolstering foster youth education attainment at community colleges, public four-year institutions, and private universities (Dworsky, 2018; Geiger et al., 2018; Lenz-Rashid, 2018; JBAY, 2022). Foster youth campus support programs provide financial assistance, housing, and academic advising (Geiger et al., 2018; JBAY, 2021). Campus support programs also provide peer mentoring support, career development training, tutoring, and an overall sense of belonging (Courtney et al., 2014; Kirk & Day, 2011).



3,000–
3,500

Estimated annual CSU enrollment of students with foster care history (JBAY, 2022)

Research shows that foster youth are more likely to enroll in and complete college when they have supportive adults who connect them with higher education resources and opportunities (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). The California legislature recently passed AB 183 (see **Table 3**) which includes trailer bill language that will among other things allocate funding to: the community college's NextUp program (an additional \$30 million, which brings their budget to \$50 million annually); the California State University campuses foster youth programs (\$12 million annually); and to the University of California campuses foster youth support programs (\$6 million annually). This is a tremendous step in investing in these vital programs. More research is needed to understand the programs from the perspective of campus support program staff (Gieger et al., 2018). This study was conducted to address this research gap.



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)

California Policy Enhancing California State University Enrollment for Foster Youth

California has been a leader in supporting its foster youth population through policy for several decades. **Table 3**, while not an exhaustive list, highlights several policies that have increased CSU enrollment of foster youth.

Table 3. California Policy Enhancing California State University Enrollment for Foster Youth

Bill	Summary
<u>AB 592 (2015)</u>	Authorizes the California Department of Social Services to provide verification of foster care status to current and former foster youth. The U.S. Department of Education Dear Colleague Letter GEN-13-18 (2013) clarified that extended foster care payments made directly to foster youth are to be excluded when determining Title IV federal student aid eligibility.
<u>SB 1023 (2014), also known as the “NextUp” Program</u>	The California State Legislature passed SB 1023 (Liu), which established a special program for foster youth enrolled in community colleges, known as the Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support (CAFYES) program, later rebranded as NextUp. This program is in place at 45 community colleges, serving 2,100 current and former foster youth annually.
<u>AB 194 (2011)</u>	Provides priority registration at community colleges, California State Universities, and University of California campuses for current and former foster youth.
<u>AB 12 (2010), also known as the “Extended Foster Care” Program</u>	The California Fostering Connections to Success Act extended foster care to age 21 in California.
<u>AB 669 (2009)</u>	Allows colleges and universities to grant resident status to foster youth under age 19 who were residing out of state as a dependent or ward under California’s child welfare system.
<u>AB 1393 (2009)</u>	Requires University of California and CSU campuses to give foster youth priority for on-campus housing. California community colleges are requested to give priority to foster youth. In addition, CSU campuses with student housing open during school breaks are required to give first priority to current and former foster youth. UCs are required to do so only for foster youth who are otherwise eligible for a particular campus housing facility.
<u>H.R. 3443 Foster Care Independence Act (1999), amended in 2000 to create the “Chafee Grant”</u>	The Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program supports youth who spend time in foster care on or after their 16 th birthday via a postsecondary grant of \$5,000.
<u>AB 183 (2022)</u>	The 2022/2023 budget bill included funding for campus support programs for foster youth across all three California public postsecondary systems. Language governing these programs was included in AB 183, the higher education budget trailer bill.

Methodology

- **Site Selection**
- **Participant Selection**
- **Data Collection**
- **Data Analysis**



Methodology

Site Selection

This study engaged with campus support programs for foster youth from 19 CSU campuses. All 23 CSU campuses support foster youth; 22 CSU campuses have a dedicated program to specifically support current and former foster youth (see **Figure 1**). The CSU system was established in 1960 under the California Master Plan. Its mission is to advance and extend knowledge,

learning, and culture throughout California. CSU's goal is to "provide opportunities for individuals to develop intellectually, personally, and professionally as well as to prepare significant numbers of educated, responsible people to contribute to California's schools, economy, culture, and future" (*California State University, 2023*). The CSU system is the largest university system in the nation, serving more than 400,000 students annually. Since California has the largest foster youth population in the nation, it is important to understand how CSUs serve students from foster care.

Participant Selection

This study used purposive sampling to select participants at the CSU campuses (*Merriam, 2015*). The participants for this study are staff members and student affairs practitioners who hold roles as directors, coordinators, and academic counselors of foster youth campus support programs within the CSU system. These practitioners work directly with students involved in foster care and attending their respective institutions. Between the survey and interviews, the research team engaged with 23 staff members, interviewing 19 staff members and surveying 23 staff members. To protect anonymity, we are unable to reveal which specific campuses we engaged with.



Data Collection

Data collection was employed in two ways. First, a survey was sent to the 22 CSU campuses with a dedicated foster youth campus support program. This survey collected data on program services, best practices, and student challenges and opportunities. Second, individual interviews were conducted with program staff. The semi-structured interviews were held on Zoom, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The research team used Dedoose to perform the analysis via line-by-line coding to analyze the qualitative data from the survey and interviews. Using line-by-line analysis, the team used a thematic analysis of content across participants' narratives (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). This thematic analysis was used to connect themes and make meaning of the staff members' experiences. This research followed five phases of analysis: (a) hearing the stories, (b) transcription, (c) memo writing, (d) interpretation of the transcriptions, and (e) examining commonalities and differences between participants (Fraser, 2004).



CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars at a graduation & recognition ceremony (Image credit: CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars Program)

Figure 1. California State University Foster Youth Campus Support Programs



Key Findings

1. Foster youth campus support programs deliver **critical advising services** that meet students' needs.
2. **Educational and social/cultural programming and case management** are common practices that exemplify quality and equity across campus support programs.
3. **Financial support is inadequate** for foster youth students and campus support programs.
4. **Trust and support must be strengthened** between program staff and campus leadership.
5. Foster youth campus support programs **measure success beyond graduation and retention statistics.**



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.

KEY FINDING 01

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

KEY FINDING 02

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

KEY FINDING 03

Financial support is inadequate for foster youth students and campus support programs.

KEY FINDING 04

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

KEY FINDING 05

Foster youth campus support programs **measure success beyond graduation and retention statistics.**



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

Campus support programs provide intentional advising, mentoring, and warm introductions and hand-offs 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.**

'Holistic' and 'wraparound support' are two common phrases that were used by staff when asked about programmatic approaches, who highlighted the importance of campus support programs being a one-stop shop. While they made it a point to make sure students had connections with various key supporters on campus, it was important that the campus support programs were knowledgeable in various aspects of higher education and student affairs. One staff member said:

“ One thing that is critical and unique is that, as a program, we connect with students immediately. We let them know that this is your go-to person on campus. This is who your point of contact is, we are a go-to one-stop shop for everything, admission, registration, financial aid, personal counseling, crisis intervention, and basic needs.

Across all interviews, staff discussed how this was important so that students did not have to “out” themselves as a “foster youth” every time they stepped foot into a new student service office. Instead, the programs acted as a liaison between the financial aid office, housing, and campus mental health services, to name a few. Being holistic and wraparound in nature enabled the campus support programs to respond quickly when a student experienced an emergency like housing or food insecurity.



In the interviews, staff members of the programs discussed how **building trust and rapport through relationships** was integral to their work. Because of the unhealthy institutions and environments these students have experienced in which adults have failed to care and support them, this is paramount in supporting foster youth in college spaces. One staff member said:

“ Being OK with the [students] reaching out to us individually regardless of what our titles are [is important]. Building those connections with their families or guardians, their mentors, and their social workers prior to them attending college makes a difference when they’re deciding what institution they’re going to pursue.

The narrative above discusses how critical it is to build relationships with key people in the student’s life, before the student even arrives on campus. Below, another staff member continues to uplift how building rapport is important when advising and supporting foster youth:

“ 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 so they can 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.



Program staff also discussed how being **culturally competent** is important in meeting the needs of the students in their program. It is important for staff to respect students’ values, attitudes, and perspectives about things such as going to college. A staff member said:

“ Something that I learned immediately during the first two years [working in the program] was that I needed to change the way I was presenting why college is important, because the moment I talked about college and a university, just that word turned them [foster youth] off; students would say, “I’m not going to school, I’m not going to apply. I’m not.” So I had to find ways to motivate them so they can see why they could continue and get their bachelor’s degree and how that could be a long-term benefit to them and their family.

Lastly, because of the negative impacts foster care can have on a young person, staff discussed how being **trauma informed** was incredibly important. A staff member uplifted:

“ The types of trauma that we see are very specific. There are several different types of training that we have to take when working with foster youth. On a basic level, even a financial aid rep, should have to have training to work with foster youth because important things will get overlooked and the student falls through the cracks because [the financial aid rep] is not aware. Oftentimes, the onus is on the student to ask a question or ask for help, but sometimes they're not ready to ask or don't know the questions that they need to ask, and we have to anticipate that need to help.

Trust, community, and connection are the heartbeat and foundation of these programs, which go above and beyond to meet the needs of the students. Some staff used words like “We are a family.” It highlights how the campus support program becomes woven into the fabric of the lives of the students at the various campuses. Foster youth need a trustworthy and highly skilled person to advise them on various academic and personal decisions that arise through their educational journey. This finding along with other research demonstrate how campus support programs play a vital role in the college-going process of foster youth (*Lenz-Rashid, 2018*). Campus support programs enhance stability, trust, and community (*Geiger et al., 2018; Hass, et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2017; Neal, 2107*).



SDSU Guardian Scholars participate in a Spring 2023 Kick-Off at the SDSU Aztec Lanes bowling alley (Image credit: SDSU Guardian Scholars Program)

“

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). These services and supports varied, and the staff found all of them to be integral to supporting foster youth, partly because of the unique challenges foster youth must traverse around. Many of the staff interviewed discussed how supporting foster youth in college is very different from other minoritized students (i.e., first-generation or low-income).

Foster youth arrive on campus without a reliable emotional and financial safety net, in part because of the systemic failures of the foster care system. Staff talked about how they must compensate for this support gap by tailoring their resources to meet these needs. In doing so, two distinct principles emerged: case management and educational and social/cultural programming. In both the survey and interview data, it was articulated that intentional programming and case management were indicators of a quality program.



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*). A case management approach can be a key function in campus support programs that enable foster youth to graduate at high level (*Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Miller et al., 2020*). Case management has become an increasingly popular support tool for college students; case management emerged from established social work practice (*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. It should be noted that case managers or case management approaches should not replace academic advisers, nor should they replace directors/coordinators of foster youth support programs, and student affairs approaches; rather, they should be supplemental to the campus support program model.

Although students typically had a main point of contact, the campus support program case management approach was collaborative, ensuring that students did not just rely on one person for support. One staff member shared:

“ Something that we’ve learned in our student update meeting ... is that [it’s best to] take a collaborative approach. Even though the student is working directly with one specific staff, the team is still well rounded [in knowledge] of the resources. We also share resources. That way, if another student comes across the situation, we will all be prepared and ready to see how we can best support the student.

Having these resources on hand provided foster youth with a quality college experience and an equitable opportunity to navigate their college campus. Staff members discussed two kinds of programming, educational and social/cultural, as vital for student success. 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.

Programming can take place on- or off- campus and produce a variety of learning outcomes (*De Sisto et al., 2022*), through which students gain educational and personal resources to support them through their educational career. Being able to go on a mountain retreat and experience snow is a privilege and not easily afforded to those who grow up in economically disadvantaged spaces. Campus support programs closed these gaps.



Some staff members talked about how they celebrated students' birthdays and graduations by giving them a celebratory card; others took the initiative to create events to uplift the accomplishments of the students in their programs. One staff member noted:

“ 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.'”

Some students might not have the financial means to celebrate their birthday. Further, some students might not have a community of support that will celebrate them, this is when the campus support programs step-in. Praising and acknowledging students in this way helps them to feel validated, which improves retention and graduation outcomes (*Rendon, 1994*).

Creating intentional educational and social/cultural programming for foster youth is crucial for quality and equity. Campus support programs for foster youth are important because they help students gain safety, a sense of belonging, and community (*Kinarsky, 2017*). Through their programming, case management, and other important resources and services, campus support programs help students navigate their educational career successfully (*Kinarsky, 2017*).



SDSU Guardian Scholars spend time with emotional support dogs (Image credit: SDSU Guardian Scholars Program)

“

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STAFF MEMBER

CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholar graduate (Image credit: CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars Program)

Financial support is inadequate for foster youth students and campus support programs.

The foster care system under-prepares youth for life after emancipation, as mentioned above housing and food insecurity are persistent challenges they navigate. Undoubtedly, this makes college enrollment difficult. 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. One staff member said:

“There’s just so much that goes into this work. Their [K-12] 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. AB12 isn’t enough. If it weren’t for our program, I am not sure how our campus would actually support foster youth.

To compound these issues, 20 of 23 staff surveyed said that helping their students navigate life after foster care ranged from somewhat to very challenging. A staff member said:

“Foster youth have different experiences; they don’t have family privilege, and universities aren’t built for student[s] like them to succeed. So oftentimes we have to fill in those gaps. The campus doesn’t have the resources; we have to fundraise the money and look for them [identify funding opportunities for the students].

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. One staff member talked about this in the interview:

“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 to run into an issue with that ... [Increasing] cost of attendance would really be something I think that we’d be able to utilize to be able to really support the program.



Separately, but equally important; nearly all of the staff surveyed said that their programs were underfunded and needed more staff to support the foster youth on campus. Moreover, nearly all of the staff surveyed said that grant writing was important to procure private money to fund students' education, given inadequate public investment.

External funding is important for this population, staff members said, because of **lack of family privilege**: Foster youth are stripped of this when they enter foster care. One staff member said, "When you think about financing your way through school, non-foster students may have financial support [from their family] to fall back on, whereas foster students may not."

Another staff member discussed the ways in which older students have a more difficult and complicated college experience because they are not able to access certain financial programs when they finally make it to a CSU campus. This barrier also impacts **transfer students**, who struggle financially in unique ways. One staff member said:

“ We have transfer student scholarships because we saw that their time in college and their [older] age [have] either maxed out on some of the benefits or aged out. So that's been an important addition to the program: offering these students \$4,000 for two years while they're here, and [it's] kind of a recruitment tool for our transfers.



Staff members emphasized that their students struggle to pay for school in part because they no longer qualify for certain financial aid programs. They talked about how they must fill in the financial gaps by procuring scholarships, grants, and emergency funds, some of which is raised through foundations and donations. Staff members said that although they are providing support, the situation is not sustainable and more work needs to be done.

This finding helps to shine a light on the financial vulnerabilities of foster youth, and how their access to financial aid and housing support is critical. Foster youth struggle to pay for college as they have a lower level of family contribution while at the same time having higher unmet needs (Tucker et al., 2023). Further, grants that are supposed to help these students pay for college (e.g., Pell Grants), are not keeping up with the steady rise of the cost to attend college (Tucker et al., 2023). It is fair to say that the current financial aid formula disadvantages foster youth. Miller et al., (2017) found that financing is a major stressor for foster youth that compounds various other mental and academic issues. Foster youth campus support programs undoubtedly bear the burden to alleviate those stressors (Lenz-Rashid, 2018).

“

Foster youth have different experiences; **they don't have family privilege, and universities aren't built for student[s] like them to succeed.** So oftentimes we have to fill in those gaps.

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. In the survey, they used words like **“lack of support and understanding of administration,” “red tape,” and “bureaucratic campus policies.”** In interviews, staff expressed that there were too few opportunities to improve working relationships with their campus leadership. One staff member articulated these sentiments by sharing:

“ 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 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.

The statement above describes the frustration about **campus leadership stigmatizing their students and their lack of support.** This disconnect not only impacts the staff member; it also affects the support that students receive from the campus. Another staff member also expressed frustration with members of their campus community stigmatizing students:

“ I’ve gotten into arguments. There are people in financial aid who won’t talk to me anymore because they persisted in calling my students ‘orphans’.

Staff expressed how the broader campus community did not understand, and at times did not respect their work, resulting in challenging professional relationships. This is problematic, as having strong, trusting working relationships between campus support staff and campus leaders enables students’ needs to be met (*Ruthkosky, 2013*).



Staff discussed **lack of consistency in leadership**. With the change in campus administration, there are different missions, vision, and values. Consistency becomes important, which is noted as a component of building trusting relationships (*Ruthkosky, 2013*). A staff member shared:

“ In the time I’ve been in this position, we’ve had two different administrations. One of the administrations was very hands on. They would imply that “We [the administration] know what’s best, or we want this because [of] this data, this information, because this is what is important.” And if they [the administration] are this hands on, even in how a Thanksgiving event should be [run], that is telling me there’s not a lot of trust in how this [foster youth campus support] program is being run. The next administration, as they’re learning, [they still want us to] give [them] all this information. Yet, there hasn’t been necessarily any movement with [the information we gave]. But then, there also hasn’t been any kind of transparency. It tells me that there isn’t trust that’s been built. Yet, all the information we’re pulling and everything we’re suggesting still hasn’t been validated.



Some of the staff expressed that this “change hump”¹ in leadership created work environments that led to low morale. Similarly, when we asked another staff member what they saw as challenges in their work, they shared similar sentiments, saying:

“ It’s a small group, it’s the cabinet, and really why it brings me more stress is because I’m so perplexed and puzzled by the idea of like, [they] hire us to do this work, but the folks that are the biggest barriers [in supporting the students] are the admin and supervisor.

Another staff member, when asked what their relationship was like with their leadership, said,

“ 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.

¹ Challenges in finding synergy on values and goals between staff and new administration (*Ruthkosky, 2013*).

The quote above highlights the performative nature of administration as it relates to engaging with campus support programs for foster youth; Moreover, this quote provides insight into how some campus support programs lacked support from leadership.

In the survey, nearly all of the staff members shared that they needed “adequate staffing,” yet they did not feel listened to. Another staff member discussed how they do not feel supported, and a lack of understanding of the labor required to run a foster youth support program.

“Often, it’s exhausting for me at our particular institution. My leadership says “Oh, well, you have one full-time student services professional serving about 100 students. We have other advisers on campus that are serving a ratio of 600 to 800 students per adviser. You’re good. You don’t need another team member.”

It is clear that there were missed opportunities in developing more trusting and productive relationships between campus support staff and leadership. These investments are vital as they enhance the student experience (Neal, 2017; Ruthkosky, 2013). 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. More broadly, it is imperative to have a culture of trust for any organization to thrive (Ruthkosky, 2013).



CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars practice yoga at a mountain retreat (Image credit: CSU Dominguez Hills Toro Guardian Scholars Program)

“

I've gotten into arguments. There are people in financial aid who won't talk to me anymore because **they persisted in calling my students 'orphans'**.

STAFF MEMBER



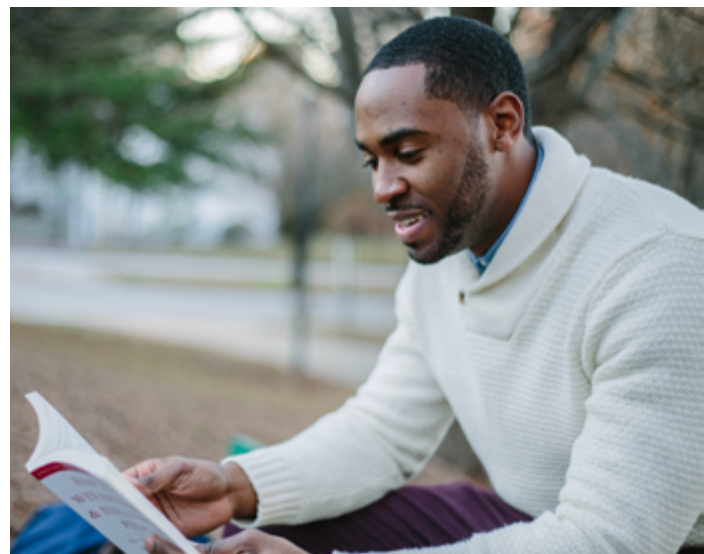
Foster youth campus support programs **measure success beyond graduation and retention statistics.**

As we aim to understand the educational trajectory of foster youth in campus support programs, it is important to recognize different approaches to measure student outcomes. 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. In the interviews, a staff member shared:

“My approach to measuring student success is... more about, “How are you doing? Are you eating? Do you have enough money? Is housing good?” So if we have students that are in university housing and their financial aid is OK, but let’s say that it depletes all their money, then I’m like, “OK; do you [now not] have money? We are going to get you a job.” I just feel like if those needs are met, then they could focus on academics.

Research shows the importance of staff looking beyond academic wellness to ensure that students’ personal and human necessities are met in order for them to be successful on their campuses (*Geiger et al., 2018; Neal, 2017*). Having guidance, emotional support and stability allow foster youth to grow and be successful (*Geiger et al., 2018; Neal, 2017*). Staff also shared how they measure success through their positive relationships with the students in their programs.

“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.



These relationships enable students to be vulnerable and feel comfortable sharing aspects of their lives that they are not always comfortable discussing. This line of communication supports the students' well-being because they have a person on campus to whom they can reach out when they need support (Geiger et al., 2018; Neal, 2017).


Staff discussed how being able to create space for students in their program to feel safe and brave enough to open up emotionally is another measure of success:

“In all reality, success to me is the fact of having students trust us enough to express, “I don't think I can do this right now,” or, “I need more help.” With many populations, that's a difficult thing to obtain, which is really trust and the building of meaningful relationships. I think that our program is relatively successful. Our students come to us when they're pregnant, when their significant other has abused them, when they're transitioning, when they've had trouble with the law—they come to us, for the most part. To me, that means a successful program, which means we're actually effecting some sort of change and building meaningful relationships. I know that's not something that's super tangible. It's not something I can give to the chancellor's office and say, “See how successful we are,” because that's not what they care about, in all sincerity. That's what we care about.

This finding helps us to understand how campus support programs measure success and approach their work. Student well-being, basic needs, and strong rapport are prioritized *along with* retention and graduation rates. Research shows that when student affairs professionals connect with students, create safe spaces, meet their basic needs, and make them feel like they belong, students tend to do better in school (De Sisto et al., 2022; Kinarsky, 2017). This sort of human-centered approach is critical when measuring student success.



“



My approach to measuring student success is more about, **“How are you doing? Are you eating? Do you have enough money? Is housing good?”**

STAFF MEMBER

Implications for Policy and Practice

- **California State University System**
- **State of California**
- **Federal**



We recommend 10 policy changes based on the study findings for supporting foster youth practices in the California State University system. We have organized implications for policy by the CSU system, the state of California, and federal levels.



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. By recognizing that every student's educational journey is different, this policy change will create more access for students.

02

Create a foster youth transition pathway program (e.g., EOP summer bridge).

Summer bridge programs at colleges and universities helped 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. Research shows that students who participate in summer bridge programs are more likely to persist beyond their first year (*Simon et al., 2022*).

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. One of the largest and most active is the Southern California Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium, founded at Cal Poly Pomona. Investing in these consortiums that have functioned without funding would surely boost the professional development of the staff.



State of CA

04

Provide financial support toward reunification and permanency for families impacted by the foster care system.

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. Family involvement is shown to increase and support college access, persistence, and graduation.

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-based support program and track their postsecondary outcomes.



Federal

07 **Remove satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirement policies for students who experienced foster care.**

Recent reports show that students who experience foster care are disproportionately impacted by satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policies (JBAY, 2023). In our study, staff also discussed SAP policies negatively impacting the persistence of students' college education. Removing SAP requirements would create equity and inclusion for this population as they pursue a postsecondary degree.

08 **Increase maximum financial cost of attendance for students who experienced foster care.**

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.

09 **Create a nationwide database on foster youth college access and retention.**

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.

10 **Complete loan forgiveness for students who experienced foster care.**

Due to the lack of family and financial safety nets, foster youth are forced to take out loans to support them through college. While some states (Nevada, Arizona, and Texas) have tuition waivers, there are still tens of thousands of former foster youth in these states who had to take out loans before the introduction of these waivers. To level the playing field and create equity for an incredibly disenfranchised population, we recommend complete loan forgiveness for students who experienced foster care.

Lastly, it is important to note that we cannot replace people with policy; we need a multi-pronged approach that includes dedicated campus staff to address students' basic needs and social-emotional needs. **No amount of funding or policy will replace these students' families, friends, and communities who show up for and support foster youth.**

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. There are clear educational debts (*Ladson-Billings, 2006*) that need to be reconciled when former foster youth enter college.

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. Other campus-based student support programs 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.



Cal Poly Pomona Renaissance Scholars graduates (Image credit: Cal Poly Pomona Renaissance Scholars Program)

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