

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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College Promise for Youth In or Aged Out of Foster Care

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Background

College has long been seen as a gateway to economic advancement. Similar to other populations, the benefits of college completion are clear for youth in or aged out of foster care. In 2019, College Promise and ETS convened scholars and leaders to discuss and write ecosystem design papers about support systems for marginalized college populations. Foster youth was one of the five populations considered. This brief is a summary of the full paper on foster youth in college.

Introduction

Foster youth who complete a college education report higher employment rates and annual earnings than those who do not complete college [11]. Like their peers, youth in or aged out of the foster care system desire to enroll in college. Although over 80% desire to attend college, roughly 20% actually enroll [4]. According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, between 3 and 10.8% of foster care alumni (FCA) who attend college will complete their bachelor's degree [9]. Studies have found that financial difficulties, needing to work, and concerns about housing are among the barriers that prevent youth in or aged out of foster care from pursuing postsecondary education [3,14]. Support services, like those provided by programs like College Promise, can serve as a mechanism to increase positive outcomes and support degree completion among foster youth. Federal policies have attempted to increase access to college among youth in or aged out of care. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) was amended in 2001 to include the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program, the first federal program created specifically to address the post-secondary educational needs of this population.

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The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 has expanded eligibility for the ETV program to youth who are at least 16 years old when they achieve permanency through adoption or subsidized guardianship [1]. Collectively, state efforts are important given the fact that exempting college students from tuition expenses has shown to increase retention rates [10]. The next section of this paper will highlight a proposed College Promise model for youth in or aged out of foster care.

College Promise for Youth In or Aged Out of Foster Care

Having supportive individuals on campus in which to turn provides what St. John refers to as college knowledge, which is the ability to utilize resources, both human and information, to navigate the educational system [15]. The following is a list of key components that should be considered in a College Promise Model Program that is designed for youth in or aged out of foster care.

Establishing a Campus Program

- Physical space

Hass et al. suggests that campuses that provide safe havens for students contribute to their self-efficacy in higher education [6]. Providing youth in or aged out of foster care with safe spaces encourages the opportunity to develop relationships with supportive faculty and staff, as well as a physical space to turn to for assistance [8].

- Academic Support

Due to sometimes abrupt school changes, students in foster care experience disruptions in their education. Therefore, having dedicated academic supports, tutoring, supplemental instruction, flexible course schedules, and accessible course materials, can all help students better achieve academic success.

- Transfer Support

For youth in or aged out of foster care at community colleges, support around transferring to a four-year institution is also incredibly important. This dedicated support can focus on connecting students to foster youth support programs at their transfer institution, ensuring the completion of any pre-transfer requirements.

Financial Support

While youth in or aged out of foster care might receive financial benefits for school, the amounts vary depending on state, county, and even agency. Additionally, tuition is not the only financial support that students need. Having the flexibility in funding streams to provide support to the entire students' financial needs is vital in supporting youth in or aged out of foster care.



While technical transformations will be necessary, equally as important are the transformations within the individuals who lead and work in institutions. Trauma informed care has five grounding principles: safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment. Ridgard et al. suggest that providing trauma informed care training to school employees can help to change the culture, policies, and procedures that traditionally govern the school [13].

Focus on Personal, Social and Emotional Support

- Basic Needs Support

Dedicated campus programs should collaborate with campus food services to provide meals to students while on campus. There is also an opportunity to provide grocery support for students when they are away from campus through the development of a campus food pantry or agreement with local food agencies to bring food to the campus program's office so that students can take food they need through a "grab and go" process.

- Healthcare Support

Youth in or aged out of foster care have traditionally had higher medical and mental health challenges than their peers that were not in foster care. Pecora et al.'s Northwest Study showed that only 47% of foster care alumni had health insurance upon their exit from foster care [12]. For colleges and universities with health care programs open to the public, health clinics open to students, or medical schools at which students can receive services, it is important to think about how students might be able to access such services.

- Mental Health Support

Stress and adverse childhood experiences may make youth in or aged out of foster care vulnerable to developing mental illnesses. Campus administrators can update policy so that any youth in or aged out of foster care can automatically gain free, unlimited access to mental health professionals. Additionally, for foster youth who currently take medication for a diagnosed mental illness, access to a psychiatrist on campus would also support consistent and accessible medication management.

- Housing Support

Housing has always been a major area of concern for youth in or aged out of foster care. For non-residential colleges, such as community colleges, there are opportunities to support youth in or aged out of foster care with housing support from state funding geared towards homeless student services, or partnerships can be developed with housing programs.

Partnering with county agencies to ensure placement for foster youth who are college students also provides an opportunity to fulfill a housing need. Ultimately, however, utilizing braided funding to develop or build housing for youth in or aged out of foster care will be vital in supporting students with stable, safe, and affordable housing support.

- Childcare

The Institute for Women's Policy Research estimates that approximately 33% of community college students have dependents, and more than 20% of all undergraduate students have dependent children [7]. For campuses that do not have an on-campus child care program, working closely with a local child care service or agency to provide child care support while students are in class, at minimum, will also help relieve the burden of balancing childcare and course attendance. Finally, campuses can remove any policies or restrictions that prohibit bringing children on campus.

- Holistic Student Support

Many campuses across the country are undergoing redesign efforts geared to increase student completion. One such effort utilizes a Guided Pathways framework which clarifies the path to completion from the first day of college through graduation by listing out all necessary courses,

incorporating experiential learning, and connecting students to life post-college. For institutions developing student support/success teams to help guide and provide just-in-time support to youth in or aged out of care, it may be beneficial to include members of the community or county that might have additional expertise in supporting special populations.



Discussion & Conclusion

Because college attainment predicts increased employment and earnings in the general population, the benefits can be even greater for youth in or aged out of foster care [11]. If college completion (not just attendance) is an earnest goal that policymakers seek to address, more attention needs to be paid to addressing the unique barriers youth in or aged out of foster care face in the pursuit of higher educational attainment. Out of the 20,445 youth who aged out of foster care in 2019, roughly only one third (6,746) are pursuing a degree and only 1,226 (6%) will likely complete that degree within six years [16].

That leaves many youth in or aged out of foster care still pursuing a degree or certificate without access to Pell Grant funding after the six-year (12 semesters) lifetime limit.

The decision by Congress to limit Pell Grant funding in 2011 to 12 semesters of post-secondary enrollment is of grave concern for college enrolled foster youth [5]. The decision to stop out because one has experienced a difficult semester or because of the need to work to earn money places vulnerable students in danger of losing critical financial aid supports (i.e., ETV, Pell Grants). There is a need for Congress to consider retaining the expanded allocations and eligibility criteria for the ETV outlined in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and reconsider the current restrictions on Pell grant policies for youth in or aged out of foster care who are enrolled in college to ensure these federal policies better align the reality of their educational trajectories [2].



College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

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Please see the following for a full copy of the report:

Millett, C. M. (Ed.) (2022). Expanding Promise: Depicting the ecosystems of support and financial sustainability for five college promise populations (Research Report No. RR-22-01). Educational Testing Service. doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12350.