



TRANSITIONAL AGE FOSTER YOUTH: Getting Them Into and Through College



PREPARED BY:

Central Valley Higher Education Consortium

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Benjamin Duran, Ed.D., is President Emeritus of Merced Community College and currently serves as the Interim Executive Director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium. Dr. Duran has over 40 years of experience in post-secondary education and policy advocacy. During his tenure at Merced Community College, he served as Co-Chair of the Commission on the Future for the California Community College League of California and also served on the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Student Success Task Force.

ABOUT THE CENTRAL VALLEY HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM

The Central Valley Higher Education Consortium (CVHEC) is a non-profit partnership of 26 accredited public, private, and independent colleges and universities in the Central Valley of California, serving a region that stretches from Kern County in the south to San Joaquin County in the north. CVHEC's mission is to provide effective leadership that promotes programs, policies, and initiatives designed to increase higher education attainment by those residing in the region.

CVHEC was founded in 2000 and has a history of building cooperation and collaboration among member institutions as evidenced by the ongoing engagement in inter-segmental, coordinated approaches to promoting higher education solutions. The Board of Directors is composed of sitting presidents and chancellors of member institutions, all of whom are committed to pursuing regional initiatives and advocating for policies that improve educational services for Central Valley residents.

Consortium initiatives are designed to assist students with meeting the challenges of navigating educational systems and acquiring any necessary financial aid with the objective of enabling all students to reach their desired educational goals. Acting in concert, the 26-member higher education institutions are making a positive impact on the level of educational achievement across the region.

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INTRODUCTION

College attendance is a hallmark of success for many young people transitioning into adulthood. Earning a college degree is a pathway to independence and can make a significant impact on an individual's quality of life.

In this competitive economy, earning a college degree will have an enduring impact on an individual's life. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (2014), more education equates to significantly higher annual incomes and lower rates of unemployment. Without a high-school diploma, an individual earns an average of \$488 per week compared to those with a bachelor's degree, who earn an average of \$1,101 per week—an income disparity of over \$30,000 per year. The 2014 Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Projections (2015) report that the unemployment rate for those with less than a high school diploma is almost 9%, while the unemployment rate for those with a bachelor's degree is only 3.5% percent. Possessing a degree significantly increases an individual's opportunities for employment and a higher annual salary, as well as for an overall better quality of life. For youth leaving the foster care system, who typically do not have family resources available as a safety net, a college education could not be more important.

Many youth leaving foster care and transitioning into adulthood experience low academic achievement and dismal life outcomes (Dion et al, 2014, Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Osgood, Foster, and Courtney, 2010). Poor educational outcomes make it difficult for many foster youth to secure gainful employment and provide for their basic needs.

If youth from foster care are fortunate enough to attend college, there are still many challenges that make earning a degree very difficult. Many foster youth students lack financial resources, are academically underprepared, struggle with mental health issues, and often lack the emotional support of a caring adult (Children's Advocacy Institute, 2010; Courtney and Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

Although many foster youth students lack academic preparation, 83% indicate that they want to attend college (Okpych, Courtney, & Charles, 2015). But of the 40% of foster youth students who completed at least one year of college, only 8% earned a degree from a two- or four-year school (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding the experiences and outcomes of foster youth transitioning into adulthood and their pursuit of a college education. While research has emerged documenting the poor educational outcomes of youth exiting foster care, there is little that examines the factors that lead to successful or unsuccessful outcomes. In addition, there has been no research focused specifically on the Central Valley and the factors that hinder and/or support the retention of college-going foster youth in the region.



PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to examine the factors that both hinder and/or support the enrollment and retention in college of foster youth in California's Central Valley. Understanding the factors contributing to the college outcomes of Transitional Age Foster Youth (TAFY) in the Central Valley will add to the growing body of literature regarding former foster youth pursuing higher education. This report further aims to enhance our understanding about the experiences of TAFY in college, especially within the context of California's Central Valley, in order to contribute to practitioners' ability to provide effective programs and services for TAFY in post-secondary education.

The Central Valley is home to some of the highest poverty rates in the state as shown in Table 1, below. Examining the experiences of TAFY enrolled in college in the Central Valley may illuminate additional challenges foster youth are likely to encounter when residing in regions with high rates of poverty.¹



TABLE 1.
POVERTY RATES BY COUNTY IN
CALIFORNIA'S CENTRAL VALLEY

Tulare County	29.6
Fresno County	28.6
Merced County	24.8
Madera County	23.4
Kern County	22.7
Kings County	21.8
Stanislaus County	21.8
San Joaquin County	19.8
Average Poverty Rate in California's Central Valley	24.06

The average percentage rate of poverty in the Central Valley is 24.06%, significantly higher than the rate of poverty in both the State and nationally. TAFY are an especially vulnerable population because of their low educational outcomes, which puts them at greater risk of experiencing homelessness, incarceration, reliance on public assistance and other negative outcomes. The risk of social and economic vulnerability for those foster youth residing in the Central Valley may be even greater considering the high rates of regional poverty.

¹ United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, County Level Data Sets retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/poverty.aspx>

Improving educational outcomes for TAFY will help improve their financial prospects and quality of life, but will also serve a societal purpose. If TAFY have a successful transition to adulthood and become productive, contributing members of the community, it will significantly help to reduce the amount of public funding used to care for this population. Table 2 below illustrates the difference in the annual cost of California’s public aid that goes toward paying for individuals who are incarcerated,² on public assistance,³ homeless,⁴ or enrolled in a four-year college.⁵



TABLE 2.
AVERAGE ANNUAL COST OF PUBLIC AID

To incarcerate an inmate	\$47,421
To provide public assistance	\$37,160
To aid individuals experiencing homelessness	\$35,000
To support a student enrolled in college in California	\$13,803

The cost per year to send a youth from foster care to college is significantly lower than the cost of public aid used if incarcerated, on public assistance, or homeless. Many youth today rely on their parents for financial support well into their twenties and even thirties. As the legal parent for youth in care, one could argue that the state has a moral, legal, and fiscal responsibility to financially support TAFY throughout their college education. Beyond the moral argument, however, investing in the educational future of TAFY is likely to result in a cost savings to government systems (and therefore taxpayers) and makes not only moral sense, but financial sense as well.

² The Price of Prisons by State Fact Sheet retrieved from <http://www.vera.org/priceofprisons>

³ Contra Costa Bee: Average Welfare Recipient Receives Over \$40,000 per year retrieved from <https://contracostabee.com/average-welfare-recipient-gets-40000-per-year/>

⁴ HUD Secretary Says a Homeless Person Costs Taxpayers \$40,000 a Year retrieved from <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/mar/12/shaun-donovan/hud-secretary-says-homeless-person-costs-taxpayers/>

⁵ California Colleges, Cost and Affordability for 2016 retrieved from <http://www.collegecalc.org/colleges/california/>



METHODOLOGY

There were two components to collecting data for this report: (1) a survey was administered to higher education professionals serving current and former foster youth attending post-secondary institutions within the CVHEC attendance area, and (2) phone interviews were conducted with selected survey participants.

In 2015, 26 colleges and university chief executive officers (CEOs) within the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium were asked to identify a liaison or point person(s) on their respective campuses who serves foster youth students. These identified liaisons or point persons were asked to complete an online survey. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to engage in a one-hour interview with the lead researcher. These participants were all higher education practitioners and were asked to identify factors that hinder and/or support the retention of college-going foster youth students. Each interview was conducted over the phone, recorded, and transcribed (see Informed Consent Form and Individual Interview Questions in the appendices). The transcriptions and audio recordings were then analyzed to identify themes. There were 21 participants who completed the survey from 16 member colleges and universities.

LIMITATIONS

There were a couple of limitations for this study, including participant selection and the variation of services and supports provided among campuses. First, the participants were identified through the campus president as the foster youth point of contact. Once the point of contact was identified, participants could volunteer for the study. It is important to note that the campus president is the organization's chief executive officer, therefore, participants may have felt some bias or obligation to participate in the study. Second, services and supports vary across individual campuses and systems, therefore, findings about support services may not be generalizable across all college campuses. Lastly, it is important to note that the information presented in the findings is based on subjective insight of professionals and that this study does not link the factors cited to actual quantifiable outcomes.

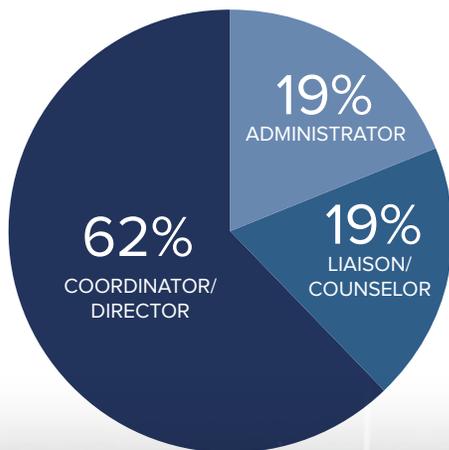
SURVEY RESULTS

PARTICIPANTS

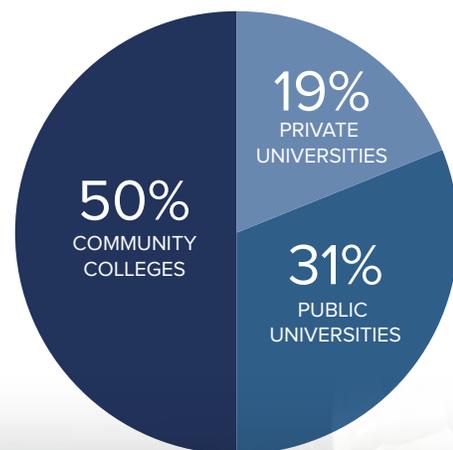
Twenty-one higher education professionals from 16 participating CVHEC member colleges and universities participated in the survey. The higher education professionals identified for this study varied in their position in the institution. There were four foster youth liaisons or academic counselors, 13 program coordinators/directors of foster youth programs or equity support programs that housed foster youth programs, and four campus administrators.

Of the 16 member colleges and universities that participated, eight were community colleges, five were public universities and three were private institutions.

HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONAL PARTICIPANTS



SURVEY PARTICIPATION BY INSTITUTION TYPE





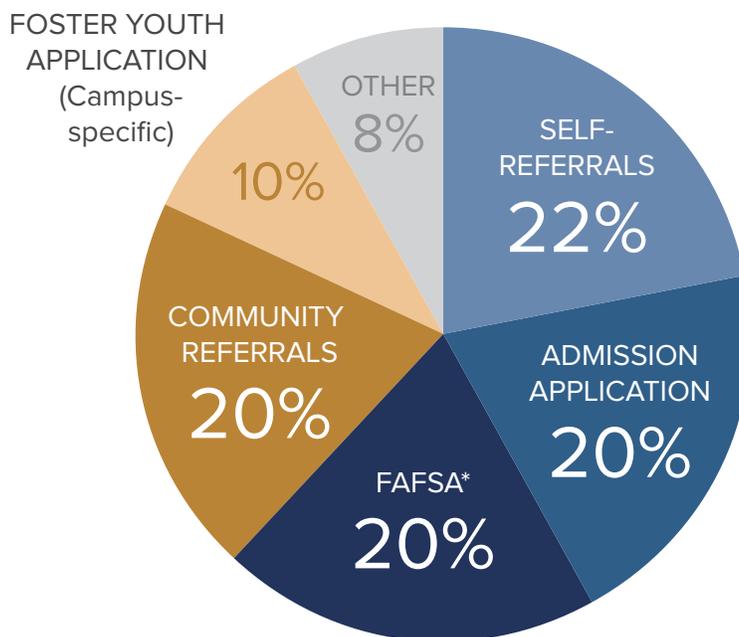
“California Community Colleges serve the greatest number of former foster youth enrolled in California’s institutions of higher education. These students are best served when colleges and universities dedicate staff and resources to this highly vulnerable and at-risk population. The barriers and challenges they face become manageable when they encounter dedicated and committed professionals trained to assist them.”

—BRICE HARRIS, PH.D.
CHANCELLOR EMERITUS, CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

IDENTIFICATION OF FOSTER YOUTH STUDENTS

Campuses use a variety of methods to identify students who experienced foster care. There were four primary methods used for retrieving information to identify foster youth students: college and university admission applications, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms, community agency referrals, and student self-referrals. Other identification methods included students self-reporting on a foster youth program application or other means such as a campus referral from another department, high school counselor referral, or Chafee Grant information.

METHODS USED TO IDENTIFY FOSTER STUDENTS

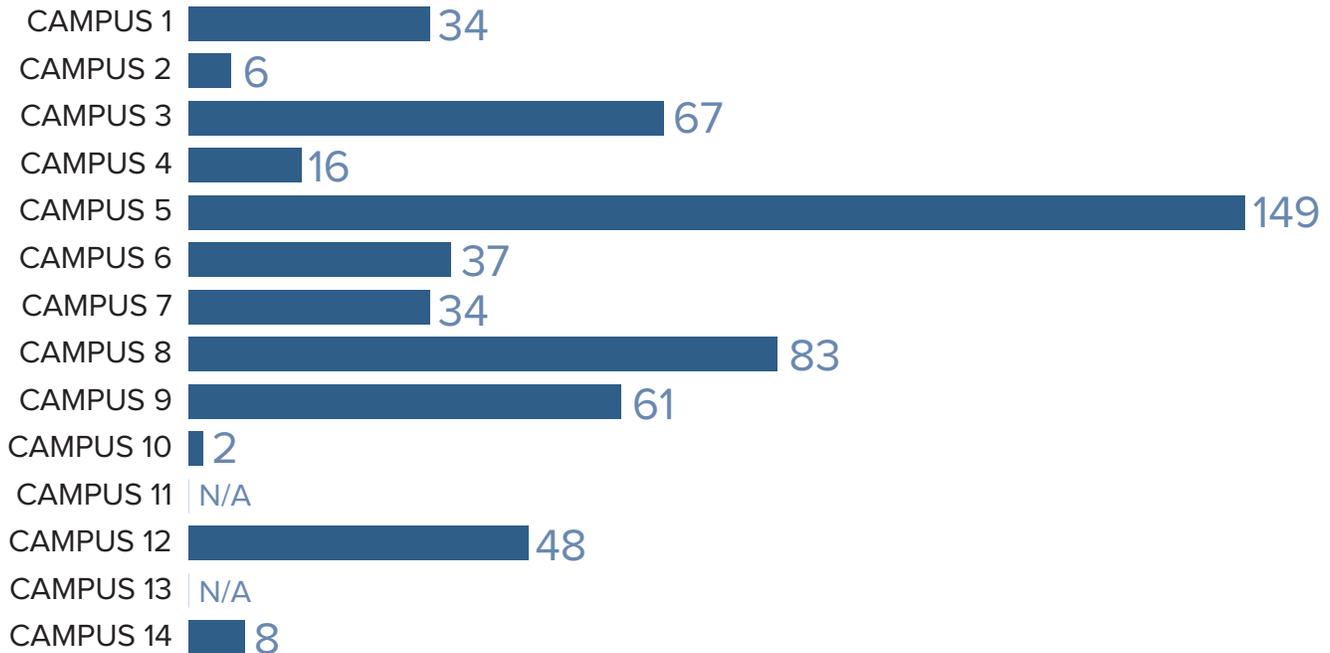


*Free Application for Federal Student Aid

TRACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT

Fourteen unique institutions responded to the survey question about the number of foster youth students enrolled for the Fall 2014 term. Of these respondents, two campuses (both universities) do not track the number of students from foster care. The remaining respondents reported 545 total foster youth students enrolled for Fall 2014.

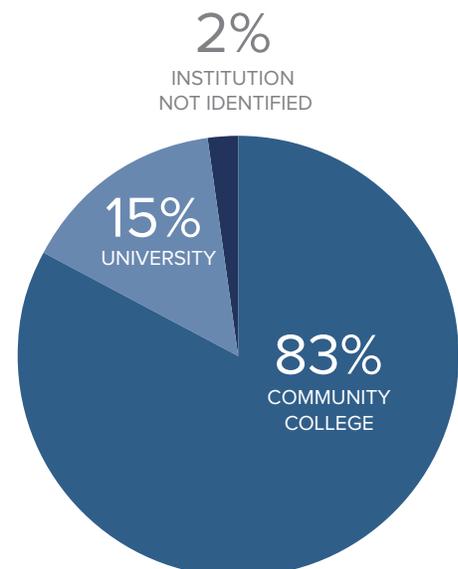
FALL 2014 FOSTER YOUTH ENROLLMENT



While the enrollment numbers provided by respondents are informative, it should be noted that these numbers are likely an undercount of the actual number of foster youth enrolled in college. It is difficult to capture an accurate number for a few reasons. First, some institutions do not track the enrollment of foster youth students. Second, institutions have different definitions of foster youth students. Some define foster youth according to the FAFSA definition⁶ and some have broader definitions. Third, students from foster care may not self report their status on applications or on other forms.

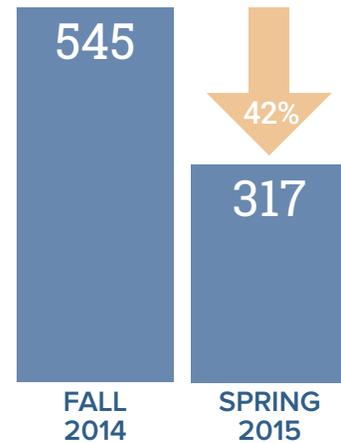
⁶ Foster youth as defined on Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) from Federal Student Aid An office of US Department of Education retrieved from <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/filling-out/dependency#dependent-or-independent>

FALL 2014 FOSTER YOUTH ENROLLMENT BY INSTITUTION TYPE



The chart above shows a drop in enrollment from the Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 terms for college-going foster youth. The data combines enrollment information from community colleges and universities. This data shows a 42% drop in enrollment in only one term. While data on college retention of foster youth is limited, this rate is consistent with the 2015 report *Charting the Course* which found that 34% of community college foster youth students were enrolled for only three consecutive terms and persistence at four-year universities was 83% (CA College Pathways, 2015). Disaggregating the data and examining the retention rate of foster youth students attending CVHEC member colleges and universities warrants further investigation.

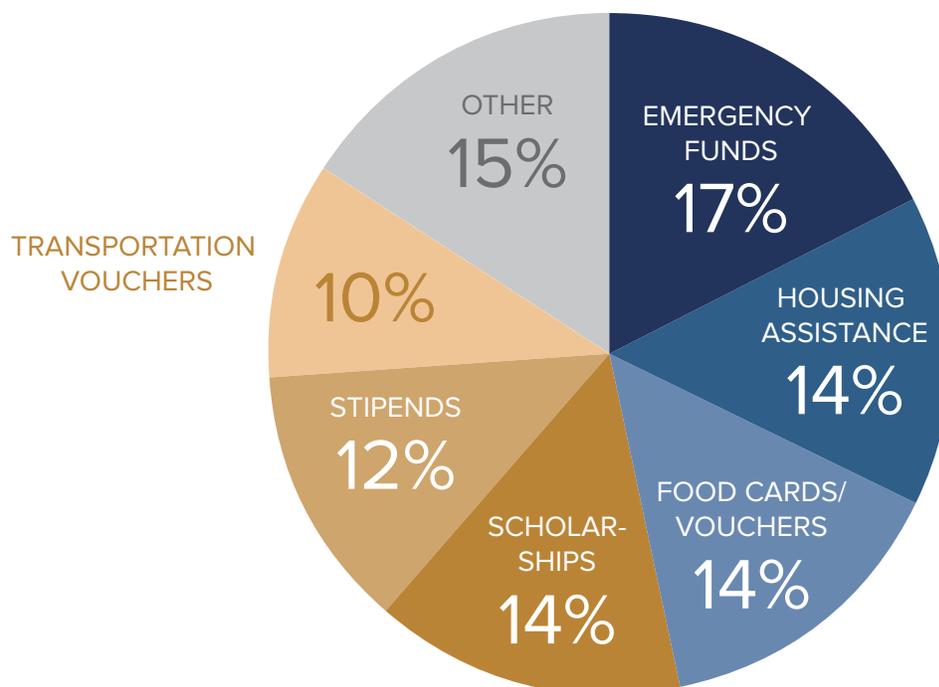
FOSTER YOUTH TERM ENROLLMENT FROM FALL 2014 TO SPRING 2015



CAMPUS FUNDED FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Campuses provide a range of financial support for foster youth students. Among this support, emergency funds were reported as the most frequent funding source provided, making up 17% of the financial support offered. This particular type of funding can be critical for foster youth students who often do not have a safety net when financial difficulties arise. The funding category “other” is at 15%, which included funding items such as books, and school and dorm supplies. Financial support also included scholarships at 14%, food card vouchers at 14%, housing assistance at 14%, and stipends at 12%. Less frequently reported funding types included transportation at 10% and child-care assistance at 4%.

TYPES OF FUNDING PROVIDED TO STUDENTS



FINDINGS

BARRIERS & CHALLENGES

Respondents were asked in the written survey and phone interviews to identify the top three to five barriers and/or challenges foster youth students have to overcome in order to successfully complete college.

There were a total of 14 barriers reported. Of these, six barriers were included in this report if they were identified by at least 25% of the interviewees. The most frequently cited barriers at 79% each were (1) financial difficulty and (2) a lack of adequate housing. The next most frequently cited barriers at 50% each were (3) academic difficulty and (4) students' lack of having a caring adult. Other barriers included (5) lack of emotional and mental health support, and (6) transportation issues, both cited by 42% of respondents.

Also of significance, 29% of interviewees identified food insecurity as an issue for students' ability to persist in school.

I think one of the largest issues we notice when [working with] Chafee Grant students ... is housing, because we're in such a small area. There are not many housing options. (Community College Practitioner)

Practitioners also reported that students did not know how to manage their money, including not having enough funds to sustain themselves during winter or summer term breaks, which created additional hardships with providing for basic needs.

Foster youth students typically do not have a parent or a caring adult in their life offering general guidance or checking in with the student about their academic progress. Often times, if the student is not doing well academically, the financial aid advisors and academic counselors are unaware until the student has failed. And that academic failure can put the student's financial aid at risk.

My biggest problem with [foster youth students] is keeping them in school ... Academic success has been a real struggle. We have tutoring ... [and] there [are] so many services, [but] they're just not really willing to utilize them. Overall, I do run into a lot of ... academic progress issues ...

They'll tell me, "I'm doing great, I got an A or B," and then the grade comes out and they failed. I'm like, "What happened?" There's no way for me to know until grades actually post, so I go off of their word. (Community College Practitioner)

Another major challenge reported was issues with experiences of previous trauma and mental health concerns.

Some of the issues [foster youth students] faced prior to coming [to college] really impact their ability to succeed and to make progress. [At this campus] we don't have mental health services [on site], so that's another challenge. It's out in the county and ... some of [the students] just don't want to go and seek the services because it's kind of a pain ... trying to get it going. (Community College Practitioner).

Previous experiences with abuse and severe neglect can create chronic and lifelong struggles with mental health issues that can pose barriers to psychosocial functioning, which can in turn be a challenge to academic success. In rural areas, access to social services can present a challenge if transportation is a barrier to gaining access to these resources, in particular for a foster youth student with limited financial and social capital.

REGULATORY BARRIERS

Respondents were asked about the regulatory barriers at their institution that interfere with serving foster youth students.

The regulatory barriers reported varied greatly by institution and included things such as: (1) no access to financial aid information, (2) program reliance on volunteers, (3) need for more direct funding to reduce student workload, (4) lack of institutional understanding about the needs of foster youth students, and (5) full-time versus part-time enrollment status impacting access to campus resources, along with other issues.

The variation with institutional barriers may be due to the unique culture, politics, and funding priorities



“We know that former foster youth often face barriers and challenges greater than most at-risk students. At Fresno State, they are an important part of our family. Therefore, we have made their success one of our top priorities by funding two full-time positions dedicated to our Renaissance Scholars Program.”

—JOE CASTRO, PHD, PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

at each campus. The most often cited barrier was a lack of stable funding for foster youth support and the continual need to fundraise.

I'm seeking funding in a world where the prices keep going up ... which means we have to go get not just what we did last year but 20% more funding or [else] reduce the number [of] students we can serve. I think there's a lot of cost that the campus could mitigate. (University Practitioner)

Another university practitioner states:

Not having a real [set] budget is definitely an obstacle but the majority of our funding ... is for salaries, so I am constantly looking at ways to raise money and get donations ... and I feel like that doesn't do service to the students.

For the most part, practitioners felt it was time consuming and a disservice to students not to have stable funding available for basic needs such as housing or secured program funding for services.

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Respondents were also asked to define the barriers and/or challenges at their institution that interfere with their ability as a practitioner to serve foster youth students.

A significant number of participants identified staffing concerns. Staff issues included a need for more training, a need for more staff and/or staff time, or having no dedicated program staff.

Not enough time in the day. I think it would be nice to have a full staff of people to be able to case manage, because the more follow-up, the more invasive counseling ... the more successful the [foster youth students would] be because they are accountable to somebody. [Staff] could build more of a rapport and ... talk about ways [the students could] be able to be more successful [by seeking out available services] ... I think our retention rates would be better. (Community College Practitioner)

Most of the practitioners, in both community colleges and universities, discussed not having enough time to adequately serve their foster youth students' needs. Many practitioners had other roles on campus and only had a portion of their time to attend to foster youth students. This limited time only allowed practitioners to be reactive instead of proactive to students' needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding the factors that hinder or help foster youth students succeed in college can help higher education practitioners create interventions to improve the educational outcomes for this student group. This section of the report provides a combination of institutional, regional, and statewide recommendations to improve retention and graduation rates of foster youth students in college.

WAIVE TUITION AND FEES

- Private and independent CVHEC member colleges and universities should pursue foundation and institutional development funds to provide tuition waivers for TAFY students.
- CVHEC member institutions should consider waiving application fees for TAFY students.
- CVHEC member institutions with campus housing should explore avenues for providing financial assistance or waivers for housing costs.
- CVHEC member institutions should work closely with students and financial aid offices to ensure foster youth students have access to adequate financial aid

PROVIDE STABLE HOUSING

- TAFY students should be made aware of the provisions of AB 1393 (priority consideration for campus housing for foster youth students).
- TAFY should be made aware of post-secondary institutions with campus housing.
- CVHEC member institutions should consider implementing “host programs” during school breaks for TAFY students to facilitate housing stability when campus dorms are closed.
- Private, independent, and community colleges CVHEC member institutions that have dorms should provide campus housing during term breaks.
- CVHEC private member institutions should consider waiving housing costs for TAFY students.





PROVIDE STABLE STAFF

- CVHEC member institutions should explore dedicating institutional dollars to secure professional staff position(s) to serve TAFY.
- CVHEC should advocate for the expansion of state funding for all public colleges and universities to enhance services for TAFY students. Senate Bill 1023 (2014) and the 2015/2016 budget act provide funding for only up to 10 community college districts to provide specialized support for TAFY at this time. For more information about SB 1023, visit http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB1023

ASSIST IN ACADEMIC PREPARATION

- CVHEC member colleges and universities should work with local child welfare departments, county offices of education Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs, and school districts to improve academic preparation of foster youth students for post-secondary education.
- CVHEC member colleges and universities should identify and inform foster youth students about the academic resources available at their respective institutions.
- CVHEC member colleges and universities should intentionally monitor the academic progress of foster youth students to provide timely interventions to meet the unique needs of this student population.

INCREASE CAMPUS AWARENESS

- CVHEC member institutions should participate in the creation of the Central Valley Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium (CVHEFYC). This consortium would provide:
 - Valley-wide professional development and training for staff
 - An avenue to collect centralized data on post-secondary outcomes of students from foster care
 - Data to educate legislators and advocate for policy changes to improve the educational outcomes for TAFY students
- CVHEC should pursue regional or foundation grants to secure staff to manage the Central Valley Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium (CVHEFYC). This staff person would:
 - Coordinate events, meetings, and activities
 - Collect, organize, and analyze data leading to policy recommendations to further policy initiatives
 - Provide trainings and technical assistance, and facilitate professional development opportunities for staff.
- CVHEC should facilitate an educational summit of CVHEC member institutions, local and state elected officials, practitioners from agencies that serve TAFY students, and other interested parties in order to expand campus awareness and explore best practices for assisting TAFY to succeed in college.

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APPENDIX A

CENTRAL VALLEY HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM FOSTER YOUTH PROJECT SURVEY

Thank you for making the time to complete this survey about your institution's methods for identifying and providing services to transitional-age foster youth. All information provided about your specific institution will be de-identified in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researchers Benjamin Duran, Ed.D., at bduran@pplpros.com or Kizzy Lopez at kizzyl@csufresno.edu

RESPONDENT'S INFORMATION:

We respectfully request that you provide your contact information in case there are any follow up questions.

First Name and Last Name

Institution or Campus Name

Title or Role

Email Address

Preferred Phone Number

IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSITIONAL-AGE FOSTER YOUTH:

Indicate all the ways your campus identifies foster youth who apply or are enrolled at the institution.

- Admission Application
- Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Self-Referrals
- Community Referrals
- Foster Youth Support Program Application (Specific to your campus)
- Other Type of Referral

Please provide the number of foster youth students enrolled during each term.

(If your institution does not formally track this information, please put "X" in the space next to question A and skip questions B-D. If your institution tracks this information, skip question A and answer questions B-D).

A) Our institution does not formally track foster youth student enrollment.

B) How many foster youth were enrolled at your institution during fall 2014?

C) How many foster youth students were enrolled during summer 2015?

D) How many foster youth students from fall 2014 returned for spring 2015?

CAMPUS FUNDING:

Indicate the funding your institution provides specifically for foster youth students enrolled on campus? Mark all that apply.

- Scholarships
- Stipends
- Food Cards/Vouchers
- Transportation Vouchers
- Emergency Funds
- Housing Assistance
- Child Care Assistance
- Other briefly describe

Please answer the following open-ended questions.

Please identify the top three to five barriers and challenges foster youth students have to overcome in completing college at your institution?

What are some regulatory barriers at the institution that interfere with serving foster youth students?

What are some barriers or challenges that interfere with you (as a practitioner) serving foster youth students at your institution?

Would you be willing to participate in an interview with one of the researchers? Yes No

APPENDIX B

CENTRAL VALLEY HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM: FOSTER YOUTH PROJECT INFORMED CONSENT

VOLUNTARY STATUS

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by the researchers listed above. Please note that your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The researchers will talk to you about the study, and they will give you this consent form to read. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine factors that hinder and contribute to the college retention and degree completion of transitional-age foster youth (TAFY) in California's Central Valley.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to volunteer for this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-hour interview. The interview will take place over the phone or in-person in an agreed location of the participants' choosing. With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped.

COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

You will not receive any direct compensation from participating in this study; however, your participation may help improve knowledge about resources and policies that can improve the college outcomes of foster youth students in California's Central Valley.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and would only be disclosed with your permission. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

Kizzy Lopez, M.S., Researcher
Benjamin Duran, Ed.D., Researcher

(559) 278-5055
(209) 761-0534

kizzyl@csufresno.edu
bduran@pplpros.com

I understand the procedures described above, and I understand fully the rights of a potential participant in this study. I agree to participate in this research and to be interviewed.

- I agree to be recorded
- I do not agree to be recorded

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date



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