Getting to Good Foster Youth Student Data

INTRODUCTION

Collecting and monitoring quantitative data is essential to advancing the California College Pathways Initiative's common agenda of supporting foster youth with achieving four important student milestones:

- **E**quip with essential resources
- **E**nroll in a college or training program
- **E**arn a degree or certificate
- **E**mbark on a career path

By examining progress and outcome measures related to these common goals, professionals can gain insight into the educational experiences of their foster youth population and use this evidence to inform institutional policies, procedures and practices that impact the achievement of those students. The collection, analysis, and synthesis of key metrics are among the first steps towards taking informed action.

California College Pathways has partnered with Ed Results in order to make foster youth data more readily available to campus practitioners through the CalPASS Plus System. CalPASS Plus, created through leadership and funding by California Community College Chancellor's Office, is an accessible, actionable and collaborative pre-K through 16 system of student data. The system is managed by Ed Results and offers longitudinal data charts, detailed analysis of pre-K through 16 transitions and workplace outcomes, information and artifacts on success factors, and comparisons among like universities, colleges, K-12 school systems and schools. By pulling data from K-12 school districts, community colleges and 4-year universities, along with labor market data, CalPASS Plus offers an opportunity to provide more robust tracking and analysis than any one system could provide independently. As such, campuses that are not currently participating in CalPASS Plus are strongly encouraged to do so.

The guidance provided below is meant to assist campus professionals to put systems in place that provide the most robust and accurate foster youth data possible. Note that it is anticipated that many campuses will continue to utilize criteria to define eligibility for campus-based foster youth support programs that may be more limited than the broad definition of foster youth proposed by California College Pathways for data flagging. The protocols for identifying and flagging foster youth described in this memo are for the purposes of data collection rather than program eligibility. It is expected that campuses will continue to independently define eligibility for their specific foster youth programs based on available resources and individual campus priorities. Whenever feasible, campuses are encouraged to track data for both the entire foster youth student population and those participating in targeted foster youth support programs where applicable.

CURRENT FOSTER YOUTH DEFINITIONS

In order to gather data regarding foster youth, first we must be able to identify who the foster youth are. This is complicated by the fact that there is no single standard definition of a "foster youth," but rather a number of eligibility criteria for various financial and support programs designated for foster youth.

Getting to good foster youth data begins with comprehensive and consistent definitions and identification methods. Generally, in order for an individual to be categorized as a foster youth, he or she must have been removed by a court from the home of his/her biological family for abuse and/or neglect and placed into a court-ordered out-of-home placement. Placements can include living with relatives, in a foster home or in a group home. Additional eligibility criteria are typically based on the amount of time an individual spent in foster care, the age at which they exited care, and their age currently. Some of the current foster youth definitions that relate to higher education include:

- **FAFSA Independent status** – Question #53 on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) asks the following in order to determine if a student qualifies as "independent" based on foster care experience: "At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?"
- **Chafee grants** – In order to be eligible for a Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) grant, a student must have been in foster care on or after their 16th birthday and the student may not have reached their 22nd birthday as of July 1 of the award year.
- **Independent Living Programs (ILP) –** In order to qualify for services through a county ILP**,** a youth must be under age 21 and in foster care at any time from their 16th to their 19th birthday. Some youth in guardianships may also be eligible.
- **Priority registration** – Statute defines eligibility for priority enrollment as currently in foster care or emancipated from foster care (i.e. exited foster care after the 18th birthday or as an emancipated minor) and currently under age 24. Regulations allow campuses to adopt broader definitions by campus or district and some have chosen to do so.
- **Medi-Cal** – In order to qualify for Medi-Cal based on foster care status (i.e. no income test is applied) an individual must have been in foster care on their 18th birthday and be currently under age 26.
- **CCC Apply** – When completing the community college application, applicants are asked about their foster care status. They are offered a variety of choices (see table 2), which combined capture any person who was in foster care at any age.
- **Transitional Housing Placement Plus Program (THP-Plus) –** In order to participate in the THP-Plus program an individual must be former foster youth who exited the foster care system on or after their 18th birthday and be between the ages of 18 and 24.
- **Foster Youth Campus Support Program eligibility (e.g. Guardian Scholars)** – Many campuses have targeted on campus support for foster youth and each program defines its own eligibility criteria. Some may employ restrictions such as age limitations and other are more broad and may even allow for students who were in guardianships or homeless to participate. The breadth of each definition often depends on the availability of program resources and some programs have tiered definitions with different types of services being available for different subsets of foster youth**.** In addition, some definitions are linked to funding sources (e.g.

programs funded through YESS ILP grants are limited to serving youth who meet the qualifications for county Independent Living Programs.)

A summary of the various definitions described above is provided in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Foster youth definition summary

Benefit type	Age in foster care	Current Age
FAFSA	13 and up	Any
Chafee ETV Vouchers	16 and up	Under 23
ILP	16 and up	Under 21
Priority registration[1]	18 and up	Under 24
Medi-Cal	18 and up	Under 26
THP-Plus	18 and up	18-24
CCC apply	Any age	Any

Table 2: CCC Apply Options

Have you ever been in court ordered foster care?[2]
☐ I have never been in Foster Care.
☐ I am currently in Foster Care in California.
☐ I was previously in Foster Care in California, and aged out[3] or emancipated[4] from the system.
☐ I am currently in Foster Care in a system outside California.
☐ I was previously in Foster Care in a system outside California, and aged out or emancipated from the system.
☐ I was temporarily in Foster Care, but did not age out or emancipate from the system.

TRACKING FOSTER YOUTH STATUS – COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Student data within the California Community College system is tracked through a centralized database known as the Management Information System (MIS). Each community college district is required to upload student level data into this system so that aggregate data can be tracked. This data is then made available to the general public online through the Student Success Scorecard[5] and Datamart System.[6] In 2012 a flag was added to the MIS in order to track foster youth status. This was a significant development in the effort to promote foster youth post-secondary educational success as it allows us to now track outcomes for this population in order to determine if current interventions are effective and creates an opportunity to spotlight promising practices and hone in on where to direct resources in order to be most impactful.

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[1] This is the requirement specified in statute however some campuses have chosen to adopt a broader definition as allowed by regulation.

[2] Per CCC Apply: "You have been in Foster Care if, by order of a court, you have been placed in a family or group home within a foster care system. Foster Care includes, but is not limited to, placement in care under the supervision of the Juvenile Court Delinquency Division. As long as you were placed within the foster care system by order of a court, you were in Foster Care. Having a legal guardian does not necessarily mean that you have been in Foster Care."

[3] Per CCC Apply: "You were aged out if, you were in Foster Care when you turned 18."

[4] Per CCC Apply: "You were emancipated if, while you were in Foster Care and under 18 years old, a court granted your independence as an 'emancipated minor'."

[5] Available at http://scorecard.cccco.edu/scorecard.aspx

[6] Available at http://datamart.cccco.edu/

The way in which this flag is currently used varies significantly by campus, compromising the reliability of the data. Although the vast majority of campuses are reporting this data to the MIS (90% report rate as of the fall of 2013), it is believed that the flag does not at this time accurately capture all of the foster youth on campus and may in some cases include students who are not in fact foster youth. In order to get to good data, campuses must utilize common definitions and tracking methods.

In some cases, campuses are tracking their foster youth but are not using the flag that populates the MIS foster youth data field. For community colleges, it is essential that the foster youth flag that populates the foster youth data field within MIS be used to track foster youth rather than an alternative data element within the local system.

When a campus uses a priority registration flag to track foster youth or tracks them manually outside of the campus data system the information is not appropriately included in the upload of local campus data to MIS. This causes the foster youth report available through CalPASS Plus to be inaccurate, and therefore unreliable. Moreover, it impedes the eventual inclusion of foster youth data on online portals such as the Datamart.

TRACKING FOSTER YOUTH STATUS – CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SYSTEMS

Unlike the community college system, the CSU and UC systems do not have a centralized mechanism for tracking foster youth and there is no requirement that individual campuses do so. However, like community colleges, four-year campuses must utilize common definitions and tracking methods in order to get to good data. As 100% of UC campuses and most CSU campuses have specialized support programs for foster youth in place, most campuses do appear to have a mechanism in place for tracking foster youth. Those that do not should consider updating their data systems to incorporate a foster youth flag and use the data collection mechanisms described in more detail below to populate the foster youth data element.

VERIFICATION OF FOSTER YOUTH STATUS

The only formalized mechanism currently in place to verify foster youth status system-wide is that used by the California State Aid Commission (CSAC) for the purposes of determining eligibility for Chafee grants. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is able to conduct a data match in order to verify eligibility of students who submit applications to CSAC for a Chafee grant across all three public college and university systems. The degree to which foster care status is verified for other benefits such as independent FAFSA status or priority registration varies significantly by campus. This can cause confusion and inadvertently results in inconsistent access to these benefits. In a handful of locations, a college or university may have a relationship with the local Independent Living Program provider or Child Welfare agency that allows a staff person with a release of information from the student to verify foster care status directly by telephone or e-mail. In most cases however, the student is required to bring written verification to the college such as a letter from the child welfare agency or a copy of a court order that verifies their status as a current or former foster youth.

USING THE FOSTER YOUTH DATA ELEMENT

Until a data verification system is created that allows for communication between CDSS and college data systems is put in place, the onus is on foster youth to self-identify and each individual campus to track them consistently. The addition of a foster youth flag to the community college MIS and most university data systems makes this job easier, but some legwork is still required by campus personnel in order to ensure that the campus is capturing accurate data.

In order to get the most accurate data possible it is recommended that each campus use a variety of sources to identify foster youth on campus and then populate the foster youth flag based on this information. Many community colleges in particular currently populate this field solely based on the information included in the student's application. While this is a good starting place, some foster youth choose to not self-identify on the application due to a fear of being stigmatized and others may mistakenly identify themselves as foster youth when they do not in fact qualify. Strong collaboration across campus departments is key to accessing all necessary information to identify eligible youth. This generally requires cooperation between admissions & records, financial aid, institutional research and student services.

The recommended practice for populating the foster youth flag is as follows:

1. First identify the population of students who have been identified as a foster youth from any of the following sources:

   - Admissions application/CCC Apply: Community colleges should include all students who answered yes to any of the five foster youth categories. Four-year universities should identify whether there is a question regarding foster care status on their application and if there is not, consider adding one.
   - FAFSA – Identify any student who responded "yes" to question #53 on the FAFSA
   - Chafee grant applications – Identify any students who were determined through financial aid to be eligible for a Chafee grant. Make sure to use the list of *eligible* students and not just those who actually received a grant.
   - Priority registration – Determine who is flagged as eligible for priority registration based on foster care status.
   - EOP/EOPS – Many campus support programs ask about foster youth status on their application or intake materials.
   - Self-identification – Campuses that operate a separate campus support program for foster youth such as a Guardian Scholars program may know of students who did not identify as a foster youth on the application or through financial aid but did self-identify to the program staff.
   - External partners – In some counties the Foster Youth Services program housed within the County Office of Education or the County Independent Living Program or county child welfare office may track which foster youth have enrolled at your campus and be able to provide you with that information.

2. Determine which of these youth have already had their foster youth status verified either through a Chafee grant application, financial aid, EOP/EOPS, a campus support program, admissions and records or through an external partner. All verified students from any source should be flagged as foster youth.

3. If resources allow you to conduct follow up with those who have not verified their foster youth status, request verification through multiple means (e.g. e-mails followed up by personal phone calls). Flag all foster youth for whom you receive verification. Only after multiple attempts to contact a student without response should a determination be made to not flag the student as a foster youth.

4. If resources do not allow for follow up, it is recommended that you overcount rather than undercount for the purposes of data collection.[7] What this means is that you would flag all students who indicated foster youth status from any source regardless of whether the status was verified or based only on self-report.

5. The verification process should impose as little burden on the student as possible. Students who have verified foster care status for one department should not be required to verify status independently for other departments, but rather systems should be in place that allow verification status to be communicated directly between departments. When foster youth are required to bring in verification, multiple forms should be accepted such as letters from a social worker or ILP program, copies of court orders, etc. as different counties may provide verification to students in different formats.

CONCLUSION

Being able to obtain relatively accurate and complete data regarding foster youth educational outcomes is essential to any effort to improve these outcomes. Without an ability to track progress, foster youth supporters will not be able to judge which interventions are most successful in order to promote the use of proven practices statewide that lead to improved outcomes. Further, the availability of data will allow for stronger advocacy around policy efforts to support the foster youth population. In order to make the California College Pathways goals a reality, it will take effort by a range of stakeholders and time and investment across systems and campuses. It is our hope that the beginning steps described in this document towards a system of shared measurement, if implemented widely by college campuses, will lead to great things to come.

[7] Campuses may continue to require verification for access to benefits such as priority registration or FAFSA independent status, however verification requirements for data collection purposes can be more flexible than those in place for benefit access.