

Conversation Starters and Motivational Responses to Encourage Foster Youth Students to Attend College Amid the Pandemic

With both college and financial aid applications in decline, there is growing concern that high school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are postponing or altogether canceling their plans to attend postsecondary institutions during the Fall of 2021. This is particularly disconcerting when considering the research on foster youth students which indicates that those who delay enrollment in community college for one year or more after leaving high school are 40 percent less likely to persist through graduation.

While the rationales for shifting their plans vary from student to student, it is important that adult supporters are clear and consistent with their messaging to address misconceptions and alleviate concerns. The following conversation starters and responses can help adult supporters to better engage foster youth students in discussions around college planning amid the pandemic.

Conversation starters to ask students their thoughts and concerns about attending college:

“How are you feeling about going to college in the fall?”

“I heard that you don’t want to complete the FAFSA. Can you share a little bit about why you don’t want to see how much financial aid you may be eligible to receive?”

“Do you have any fears or concerns about applying for financial aid or going to college?”

If a student says...

“I’d like to wait to go to college until classes are back in-person because I don’t think I will do well if my classes are online.”

Sample response: I understand that online classes can be a lot harder than in-person courses. Colleges have a lot of resources to ensure that students do well in their courses, including tutoring, academic advising, and office hours where you can receive one-on-one support from your instructors. You can also work with a college counselor to plan your course load for the fall to ensure the classes you take will be well suited for an online learning environment. Many classes have options for live or recorded courses depending on your preference.

We also know that things are rapidly evolving as the COVID-19 vaccine is being rolled out, so in-person classes may be available sooner than we think. Since the future is unknown, there is no harm in applying. You can always decline financial aid if you decide not to go.

“I’d like to wait to go to college until classes are back in-person because I am tired of being on Zoom all day.”

Sample response: You have a lot more flexibility in creating your class schedule in college. You may have certain classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and others on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You can also register for classes at different times throughout the day to ensure you have adequate breaks and time away from the computer.

There is no harm in reaching out to a college advisor and sharing your concerns so you can develop a schedule that best meets your needs. I encourage you to explore your options before making the decision to not enroll.

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“I’d like to wait to go to college because I feel the need to get a job and make extra money right now.”

Sample response: I can understand why you feel that way. I want to make sure that you understand that by filling out a FAFSA you will be able to estimate the amount of financial aid funding that you may be eligible to receive. There is no harm in applying. You can always decline financial aid if you decide not to go, but this will help you determine if you still need additional income through employment. If you are eligible and choose to participate in extended foster care you may also be able to receive monthly payments if you live independently in a Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP). You can actually receive both extended foster care monthly payments as well as financial aid to help with living expenses like rent, food, transportation, etc.

Additionally, by going to college, you’ll also set yourself up to make a lot more money over the long term than you would if you didn’t go to college. People with a college degree end up making a million dollars more over their lifetime than people who don’t have a degree. That’s a lot of money!

“I’m concerned about where I am going to live if campuses are closed”

Sample response: Many campuses are still allowing students with foster care backgrounds to reside on campus if they do not have anywhere else to live. In addition, foster youth qualify for priority housing at CSU’s and UC’s. You just need to self-identify as a foster youth. If you go to the California College Pathways website, we can find out who the foster youth contact is on campus that can help you get connected to housing and other foster youth supports.

The website is: <http://www.student.cacollegepathways.org/find-campus-support-programs/>

“I want to take a gap year.”

Sample response: It sounds like you are interested in taking a break from school right now. I understand why you would feel that way. Did you know though that research shows that foster youth who delay going into a community college right after high school are 40% less likely to persist (or make it through college). What support could be helpful to you to make it easier to enroll directly into college?

Also, I want to make sure that you understand filling out a FAFSA doesn’t mean you have to go to college, but doing so will keep your options open for now. There is no harm in applying. You can always decline financial aid if you decide not to go.

“High school has been really hard and I’m not sure college is for me.”

Sample response: I’m sorry to hear that school has been challenging. I want to make sure you know that you can also apply to colleges that offer Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that will help you explore and develop professional skills for a variety of jobs. CTE programs emphasize hands-on learning and you might like the “learn by doing” approaches they take to teach students new things. Just like other college programs, you can complete the FAFSA and use financial aid to pay for the cost of CTE programs. Is this something you would like to explore further?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to fill out the FAFSA or go to college, it just feels overwhelming right now given everything that’s happened this year.”

Sample response: I understand. This has been a hard year for many people, and you are not alone. Applying to college can feel overwhelming, especially with remote learning this year and the pandemic. We are still here to support you through this process even if we can’t meet in-person. I think that if we can break down the steps into smaller chunks it might not feel so overwhelming. And completing the FAFSA is actually easier than you think. Because you are a foster youth, you get to skip over a lot of the questions. We can schedule a time to complete the FAFSA together online and create a step-by-step plan to complete all the other necessary steps after the FAFSA. Together, you can do this!