FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: FOSTERING RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACHES IN NEXTUP PROGRAMS

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Introduction

As the landscape of student support has evolved, new light has been shed on the critical role that relationships play in promoting student success. This document is grounded in the understanding that relationship-based approaches work, particularly for students with a history of trauma, which is inherent in the population served by the NextUp program. Building upon this knowledge, this document presents evidence-based theories and frameworks to empower practitioners to develop their own operating theory and employ relationship-based best practices for student success within their NextUp program.

The core objective of this document is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The aim is to support program staff to synthesize and implement effective approaches from existing programs, such as Guardian Scholars, EOPS, and NextUp, and harness the institutional structures, practices, and policies that cultivate transformative relationships and a sense of belonging. This resource offers tangible examples of how to engage youth in day-to-day work, drawing upon a range of approaches. By bringing these elements together, programs can enhance the quality of services provided and ultimately improve social and educational outcomes for students with experience in the foster care system by creating structures and practices that promote healing and success for students and practitioners alike. This document is not about reinventing the wheel but rather about building upon the knowledge developed since the NextUp program launched in 2015. It is about combining the proven effective approaches, integrating them seamlessly into the fabric of a NextUp program, and unlocking the potential for meaningful positive change.

This tool begins by providing a framework to operationalize student success through the California Community College Chancellor's Office Vision for Success and Guided Pathways initiative, as well the RP Group's groundbreaking study, "Student Support (re)Defined." The journey continues with an exploration of theories and approaches for student engagement that establish a foundation for effective student support, particularly for students with lived experience in the foster care system.

This includes Validation Theory, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing and affirming students' experiences and perspectives, followed by Trauma-Informed Education, which offers tools to create supportive environments that acknowledge and address the impact of trauma. Finally, Healing Centered Engagement is presented, which embraces a holistic approach to healing and well-being, and the Youth Thrive framework is explained, which fosters transformational relationships essential for student success.

We invite you to read on and discover how these approaches can enrich your program and practice, foster resilience, and empower students with experience in foster care to thrive academically as well as personally. By leveraging these approaches, NextUp programs across the state can create an environment where every student can achieve their full potential and experience the transformative power of unconditional belonging.

Envisioning Student Success

Each NextUp program's theoretical framework should be grounded in a robust understanding of student success and the elements that promote it. The California Community College Chancellor's Vision for Success provides a clear roadmap, guiding collective efforts to improve outcomes and advance equity within the community college system. This visionary plan sets the stage for transformative change, emphasizing the importance of access, affordability, equity, and workforce development.

To bring this vision to life, the Chancellor's Office introduced the Guided Pathways initiative, aligning with the broader goals of the Vision for Success. Guided Pathways presents a holistic approach that guides students on a clear and purposeful educational journey, offering structured pathways from initial college exploration to degree attainment and beyond. NextUp is a student-centered program that is well-aligned with this approach to increase access, shift the burden from students to institutions, strengthen unconditional belonging, and ultimately create a comprehensive support ecosystem for students with experience in foster care. By fostering intentional, student-centered relationships along these pathways, college staff and faculty can create the foundation for transformative educational experiences.

Aligned with the Guided Pathways approach is the [RP Group's](#) *study, "[Student Support (re)Defined](#)." Its [Success Factors Framework](#)* highlights six campus success factors. Underscoring the pivotal role relationships play in student success, these factors are centered around relationships with students and how we engage with them to achieve positive outcomes. These factors should serve as guiding principles for institutions and NextUp programs as they shape policies and interventions.
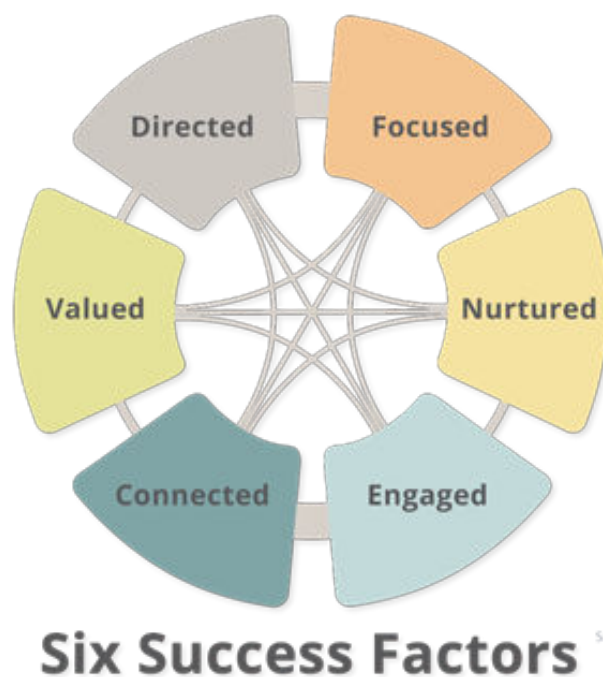

Figure 1: RP Group's Six Success Factors

RP Group [Success Factors Framework](#)
- **Directed**: students have a goal and know how to achieve it
- **Focused**: students stay on track — keeping their eyes on the prize
- **Nurtured**: students feel somebody wants and helps them to succeed
- **Engaged**: students actively participate in class and extracurricular activities
- **Connected**: students feel like they are part of the college community
- **Valued**: students' skills, talents, abilities and experiences are recognized; they have opportunities to contribute on campus and feel their contributions are appreciated

It is worth noting that four of the six factors (Nurtured, Engaged, Connected, and Valued) are grounded in the power of meaningful relationships and community engagement.

Theories and Approaches for Student Engagement

[Validation Theory](#) by Laura Rendon
The application of Validation Theory is intentional and proactive. Validation theory acknowledges each student as a valuable member of a learning community, a creator of knowledge, and capable of being successful in and outside of the classroom. Validating the abilities of students is particularly beneficial for students of color, low-income, foster youth, first-generation and re-entry students. The fundamental premise is that through validating actions, individuals who engage

with students can nurture their confidence and self-perception which can lead to student success, learning, and development.

According to Rendon's research, validating experiences include:

- Learning students' names and taking the time to greet or call the student by name when they come into the office, classroom, and when seen around campus.
- Creating opportunities where students see themselves as successful learners.
- Reflecting students' backgrounds, lived experiences, and culture in the curriculum construct through a strength-based representation of student diversity.
- Recognizing that students are experts in their lived experiences and culture and opening oneself up to learning from a student's expertise.
- Maintaining high expectations and expressing confidence in students' abilities and skills.
- Working with students to take ownership of their futures and partnering with them to support their planning.
- When appropriate, engaging family and friend networks to support the student with their education/career goals.
- Cross-collaborating with faculty and staff to reinforce the implementation of validation in teaching and engagement practices.
- Creating meaningful relationships with students that can support the student beyond the classroom.

In *Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions*, Laura Rendon notes: "The impact of validation on students who have experienced powerlessness, doubts about their own ability to succeed, and/or lack of care cannot be understated. Validation helped these kinds of students to acquire a confident, motivating, "I can do it" attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student."

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)

The Trauma-informed Approach seeks to change organizational culture and place emphasis on understanding, respecting, and appropriately responding to the effects of trauma at all levels (Bloom, 2010).

While much of the research around TIC originated within the medical field, the approach has quickly spread to various sectors including child welfare, education, and social service organizations. Fallot and Harris (2001) developed a Self-Assessment and Planning Protocol to guide organizations through an analysis of policies, procedures, practices, and environmental factors. They identified steps to create a trauma-informed organization which include:
- Identifying and addressing any potential retraumatizing policies and procedures.
- Establishing a well-qualified team to support the mental and emotional needs of individuals who have experienced trauma and its effects.
- Ensuring administrative commitment to integrating a trauma-informed culture.
- Offering trauma-informed trainings to all employees within the organization.
- Engaging with constituents (faculty, staff, administration, and students) to conduct evaluations and identify areas of improvement.
- Integrating respectful assessments that screen for well-being and facilitate access to resources.

Working to prevent retraumatization is fundamental to the work of TIC. The chart below is part of a larger infographic based on Fallot and Harris's research. Their work identified specific institutional policies, practices, and points of engagement where retraumatization may occur. While avoiding retraumatization is an important part of the work, practices that promote belonging and well-being are also central to the role of practitioners. These practices will be further discussed in the next section.

Table 1: Areas of Potential Retraumatization

System (Policies, Procedures, The ways things are done)	Relationships (Power and Control)
Having to continually retell their story	Not being seen/heard
Being treated as a number (transactional interactions)	Violating trust
Invasive practices	Failure to ensure emotional safety
Being seen by a label (homeless, foster youth, transgender)	Non-collaborative
No choice in services or case plan	Does things for rather than with
No opportunity to give feedback about their experience with service delivery	Use of punitive treatment, coercive practices, and oppressive language (judgment or blaming)

Table 1: Areas for Potential Retraumatization, adapted from Simpson, R. & Green, S.A. (2014).

The TIC framework can help programs and institutions evaluate current policies and practices that may pose barriers and unintended negative impacts on vulnerable student populations. Engaging in process mapping and thoughtful analysis can help streamline procedures and greatly improve students' abilities to access resources and engage in their campus community.

Healing-Centered Engagement by Shawn Ginwright

"The healing-centered approach comes from the idea that people are not harmed in a vacuum, and well-being comes from participating in transforming the root causes of the harm within institutions."
~Shawn Ginwright, Ph.D.

Dr. Shawn Ginwright first used the term "healing-centered engagement" in his 2018 article *"The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing-Centered Engagement,"* published in Medium. Healing Centered Engagement focuses on the "healing power inherent in relationships and the collective community." Dr. Ginwright grounds the approach in five guiding principles known as CARMA:

- **Culture**: Developing an awareness of one's own and other's humanity, ethnic history, and racial and other social identities.
- **Agency**: The individual and collective ability to act, create, and change the root causes of personal, social, and community challenges.
- **Relationships**: The capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others.
- **Meaning**: The profound discovery of who we are, where we are going, and what purpose we were born to serve.
- **Aspirations**: The exploration of possibilities for our lives and the process of accomplishing goals for personal and collective livelihood.

While Professor Ginwright acknowledges the importance of trauma-informed care, he also takes into account its limitations when working to address elements of healing and justice. The chart below features some of the ways Healing Center Engagement (HCE) shifts beyond TIC to promote a collective approach to healing and acknowledges the "inherently political" element of addressing injustices.

HCE also encompasses the lived experiences of practitioners and recognizes the need to incorporate institutional healing and well-being practices to empower staff to effectively support others. As Dr. Ginwright notes, "practitioners cannot be expected to pour from an empty cup."

Table 2: Transitioning from Trauma Informed to Healing Centered Engagement

Trauma Informed Care		Healing Centered Engagement
Shift from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"	➜	Shift from "What happened to you?" to "Who are you?", "What is right with you?" and "What is right with your community?"
The focus is on how trauma (generational, episodic, chronic) impacts the individual.	➜	Focuses on holistic factors to heal individuals, relationships, and institutions with the essential knowledge that "we are more than our trauma."
Founded on pathology - uses a clinical, individual approach for treatment.	➜	Acknowledges the individual's agency in healing and the political nature of addressing systemic oppression.

Adapted from *"The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma-Informed Care to Healing-Centered Engagement."*

The Praxis Project has developed a brief, "*Recognizing Healing-Centered Community Practices as a Complement to Trauma-Informed Interventions and Services,*" to provide further insights on how healing-centered approaches can support individuals and communities who have been disproportionately impacted by a history of systemic oppression.

Youth Thrive Framework

The Youth Thrive Framework includes guiding principles that incorporate Protective and Promotive Factors and Healing Centered Engagement. It blends elements of Trauma Informed Care and Healing Centered Engagement to create a framework for creating transformational relationships that empower both the service provider and the student. The Youth Thrive Framework focuses on five guiding principles:

- **Youth Resilience**: Managing stress and functioning well when faced with stressors, challenges, or adversity; building on individual characteristics, strengths, and interests.
- **Social Connections**: Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, and a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters.
- **Knowledge of Adolescent Development**: Understanding the unique aspects of adolescent development including information on adolescent brain development and the impact of trauma; implementing developmentally and contextually appropriate best practices.
- **Concrete Support in Times of Need**: Understanding the importance of asking for help and advocating for oneself; receiving quality services (e.g., health care, housing, education) designed to preserve youths' dignity, provide opportunities for skill development, and promote healthy development.
- **Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence**: Acquiring skills and attitudes (e.g., executive functioning, character strength, future orientation persistence, and positive emotions) that are essential for forming an independent identity and having a productive, responsible, and satisfying adulthood (Harper Browne, 2014, p. 3).

The figure below is taken from *"Youth Thrive: A Framework To Help Adolescents Overcome Trauma And Thrive"* (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013) and provides a visual representation of the concepts integrated with this framework.
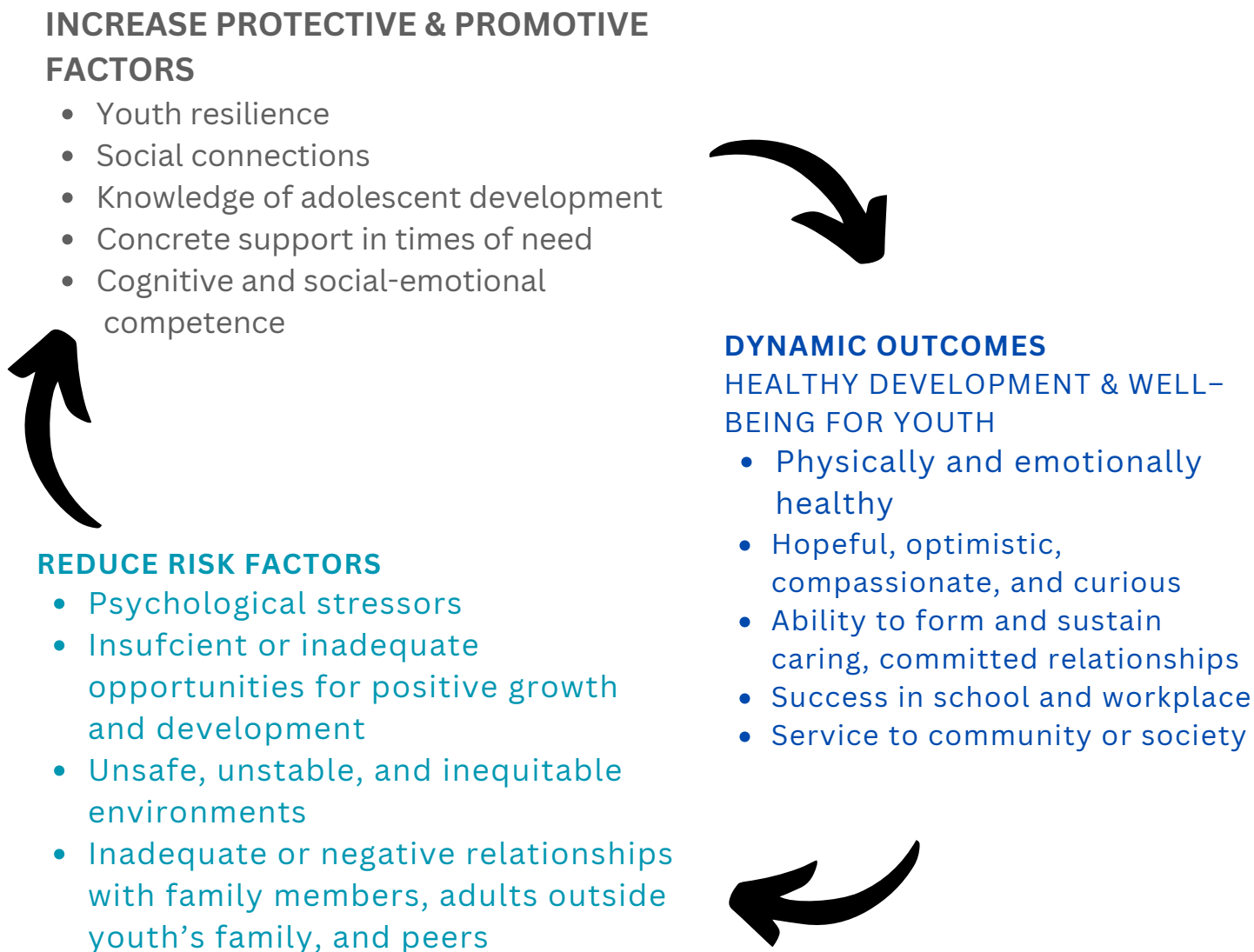
INCREASE PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS
- Youth resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of adolescent development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Cognitive and social-emotional competence

DYNAMIC OUTCOMES
HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT & WELL–BEING FOR YOUTH
- Physically and emotionally healthy
- Hopeful, optimistic, compassionate, and curious
- Ability to form and sustain caring, committed relationships
- Success in school and workplace
- Service to community or society

REDUCE RISK FACTORS
- Psychological stressors
- Insufcient or inadequate opportunities for positive growth and development
- Unsafe, unstable, and inequitable environments
- Inadequate or negative relationships with family members, adults outside youth's family, and peers

Figure 2. *"Youth Thrive Framework (Center for the Study of Social Policy,"* 2013)

The Youth Thrive Framework encompasses a number of tools to support practitioners who work with youth. The report *"Transformational Relationships for Youth Success"* shares findings from a qualitative study exploring the effective engagement practices that contribute to cultivating transformational relationships with youth. Additional information on activities that increase protective and promotive factors can be found in "*Everyday Actions: Youth Workers Helping Young People to Thrive*."

The chart below, taken from "*Transformational Relationships for Youth Success*," summarizes the actions and qualities that experienced staff exhibit when forming transformational relationships with youth. A guide to coaching tools is also available to help supervisors and direct service practitioners with implementing the Youth Thrive framework. Collectively these materials can provide an actionable blueprint for effective youth engagement.

Table 3: Transformational Relationships

Transformational Relationships	Staff who excel in building these relationships
Start with youth being heard	Pay attention, listen without judging youth as good or bad, and look for the person beyond the case.
Involve persistence over time	Are remarkably persistent, don't give up, try again and again to get a relationship started, and stick with it over a long period even when the relationship faces significant challenges.
Require workers to be "real"	Reveal themselves to some extent, convey something in common with the youth, and understand the world the youth comes from.
Involve challenging the youth	Challenge, push, and do so in a way that encourages youth to reflect; say, and do the difficult things even when youth don't want to hear it.
Take advantage of crises	Show up when not expected, stand by youth when they're in trouble, and help youth distinguish moments of failure from being a failure.

Adapted from Transformational Relationships for Youth Success.

Theory in Action

Transformational relationships are built on the fundamental belief that NextUp students can and will succeed with time, consistency, opportunity, and the proper supports in place. These supports are not only intended to serve the student, but fully engage them in the program so that they can play an active role in their healing and that of their community. Colleges can create spaces and opportunities for authentic student engagement in a number of ways. Below are examples of student engagement practices across two southern California community colleges. It is worth noting that these practices require acting in partnership with students and take time and thoughtful planning to successfully implement.

Orange Coast College:
- **Recruit, hire, and train program participants as student staff**. Students with a minimum of one year of experience in the foster youth support program have an opportunity to work as program staff and receive professional development. Their main responsibilities include engaging and welcoming program participants, reaching out to new and returning students, assisting with developing and co-facilitating programming and workshops, managing the drop-in community space, and participating in faculty and staff trainings and presentations as lived experience leaders.
- **Invite NextUp/Guardian Scholars to join the Program Advisory Committee**. Students are invited to apply to participate in the program's advisory council. The advisory group consists of campus and community partners, program staff, and students who meet every semester to discuss program accomplishments, challenges, opportunities, and needs.
- **Gather student feedback on proposed program changes and overall satisfaction.** Changes to program practice or policy are discussed by staff and shared with participants in the form of a feedback survey and informal dialogue during appointments and in the drop-in community space. Students are invited to share their thoughts, concerns, and questions to help inform staff before programmatic changes are made. Additionally, students complete an anonymous point-of-service survey 1-2 times per year to provide feedback on their experiences and satisfaction with program policies, structure, and support services.
- **Recruit and train student speakers for panel presentations**. Students receive training in strategic storytelling to assist them with determining what aspects of their story they are willing to share and set healthy boundaries when sharing their lived experiences. Upon completing the training, students are invited to join campus and community panels to advocate for the needs of youth with experience in foster care and uplift the importance of dedicated campus services for this student population.

Los Angeles City College:

- **Recruit and train student workers to lead outreach efforts, conduct intake sessions, and facilitate program orientation sessions.** Student workers conduct outreach to new students, assist with the application process, and conduct intake assessments to connect new students with campus and community resources. Student staff also lead the program orientation and emphasize the community element of the program, encouraging students to take part in program workshops and events.
- **Empower students to create a student-led club.** The Fostering Scholars Club is a student-led campus club open to program members and the larger campus community. It consists of individuals who have been directly or indirectly impacted by the child welfare system and allies who want to be active agents of change. The club is supervised by the Guardian Scholars/NextUp Coordinator who provides guidance in areas of event planning, budgeting, and fundraising. Along with amplifying the voices of students with experience in foster care on campus and representing their needs to the larger Associated Study Government (ASG), the Fostering Success Club requests ASG funding to coordinate events during Foster Care Awareness Month.
- **Conduct a Student Needs Survey at the beginning of every academic year.** The survey asks students to share information about their anticipated needs (e.g., housing, technology, basic needs), identify areas of interest for personal development, and brainstorm experiences they would like the program to facilitate over the course of the year. The information collected informs programming and helps program staff to determine what resources to procure and which community partnerships are necessary to meet students' expressed needs.
- **Engage students in formal program evaluation.** Program staff develop a process for a formal program evaluation that solicits feedback from staff, students and faculty on program services across program pillars including student completion (students meeting educational goals), the quality of services and resources provided (timely and effective services), student engagement (students feeling respected and supported), and ability to easily access information (website content and materials). The survey tool used to gather this data is created by a workgroup consisting of program staff, students, administrators, faculty, and representatives from institutional research. Student focus groups are also facilitated to gather student feedback on programmatic strengths and areas of improvement. The data gathered is used to generate a report that is shared with the workgroup, student community, and the student services division to inform unit goals and values as well as program improvement planning.
- **Create safe spaces where students can express their needs, frustrations, and experiences without judgment**. Peer-to-peer check-ins can provide students an opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences and feel heard and affirmed. Programs can include activities during events and workshops when students are gathered to check in with students individually or in small groups. Polls, table talks,

and activities like <u>My Six Word Memoir</u> can be a fun way to engage students in these conversations. Community space where students can congregate greatly enhances opportunities to engage students in informal and unstructured conversations to quickly gather feedback, thoughts, and ideas.

- **Show up as your authentic self.** Expecting students to share their thoughts, frustrations, concerns and personal experiences requires a level of trust and vulnerability. Staff can model what this looks like by showing up for students as their authentic selves. Sharing interests and insights into their personal and professional lives while modeling healthy boundaries is an important aspect of building trusting relationships with students. Staff use every interaction with students as an opportunity to learn about one another as people, build on communication, and model positive behavior.

NOTE: Asking students to share their lived expertise to inform program planning, increase campus awareness, and advocate on behalf of students with community partners and possibly funders are critical roles that require emotional labor, time, and skill. Work with students to identify comfort levels, training needs, and fair compensation in recognition of their lived expertise and contributions (e.g., panelist stipend, gift cards for focus group participation, etc.).

Student Engagement Opportunities
Below is a chart that identifies important areas for discussion about NextUp program development and implementation as well as activities that recognize and honor the lived expertise of the students they serve. These activities seek to bring together the theories and frameworks discussed in this document and create spaces within which staff and students can learn from each other and contribute to the development of quality programming and services.

Topic	Discussion Questions	Suggested Activities
Outreach and Recruitment	What community partners do we communicate with to share information about our services? How do we develop the language to communicate with our audiences? Where are there opportunities to integrate student voices in developing our program materials and in framing our message? How can we nurture and maintain positive relationships with campus and county service providers? What opportunities exist for frequent interactions, resource information sharing, and collaboration to mobilize resources for current and future students? What student-centered strategies are in place to facilitate easy access to the program?	**Student Journey Map** • Gather a group of current students who have joined the program within the last year. Work with them to map out their campus and program enrollment experience from beginning to end to improve communication and streamline access. • Identify entry points, individuals involved, barriers to access, use of technology, and communication tools that impacted the students' experiences, either positively or negatively. • Assess marketing materials and messaging for the use of trauma-informed and strength-based language as well as effectiveness. Facilitate a discussion with students and partners to evaluate the referral process. How are trauma-informed approaches integrated into the referral process? What does a "warm handoff" consist of?
Academic Case Management	How do we define academic case management? and What does it entail? What initial assessment do we use to capture information about the student's well-being and potential threats to future success? Where do we house information to maintain accurate student history while maintaining student privacy? What partnerships need to be developed to ensure linkages to essential support services to address a student's well-being?	**Case Management Workflow** Facilitate a discussion with students to identify effective case management strategies. What considerations are important for staff to keep in mind as they work with students with experience in the foster care system? What attitudes and implicit biases could negatively impact the work? Once you have a draft of your case management workflow, share it with stakeholders to gather feedback and identify opportunities to improve the information referral process and the student experience.

Student Engagement	What steps have been taken to assess the program environment, policies and practices through a trauma-informed lens? What approach(es) do we use to guide engagement with our students? How do we create a safe environment where students can be vulnerable without fear of judgment or blame? What trainings/tools are available to support staff in developing the tools and resources to build transformational relationships and develop opportunities for collective healing?	Complete the **RP Success Factors Action Plan** or create a program logic model Engage students in a conversation: What does the optimal student experience look/feel like? - front counter, academic advising, case management and referral, tutoring, etc.? • What practices or strategies are currently applied to promote this outcome (e.g., smiling, referring to the student by name, drop-in hours, flexible scheduling, family-friendly environment, etc.)? • Where are there opportunities for growth to improve the quality of student engagement? • Reflect on what resources/skills/ knowledge needs to be cultivated/ gathered to support staff throughout the process.
Program Evaluation	How do we define success in our program? Whose voices are included in the "we" that shape this definition? What data are we using to determine how we measure "progress" and "success" in our program (e.g., student self-assessment, GPA, units completed, etc.)? How are we integrating student voice and experience to improve overall program services and structure? What opportunities are there to conduct regular program evaluation through stakeholder feedback (e.g., student, campus providers, and community stakeholders) to identify areas for program improvement, inform service delivery, and identify potential changes to program protocols and policies?	**Student Satisfaction Survey** Work with institutional research to design a student satisfaction survey to gather student feedback. Potential areas for feedback • How do students experience the program? • What practices/activities do students find most helpful? • What policies/practices do students experience as barriers? • What factors have a positive impact on students' retention and success? Existing programs: Bring together students to conduct a SWOT analysis of the program structure and services. The SWOT analysis will identify the program's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and inform program planning and design efforts. Invite students to provide feedback on how to improve the service coordination and the student experience.

Conclusion

Ultimately, NextUp programs are much more than academic support programs. NextUp programs provide intentional spaces where students can find belonging, enhance their well-being, and discover their purpose. The frameworks summarized in this document provide opportunities to create meaningful, trusting, and transformational relationships with young people as they navigate their college journey. Each practitioner plays a pivotal role in shaping the college experience for students with lived experience in the foster care system. Moreover, the Chancellor's Office calls upon colleges to commit to creating a student-centered support ecosystem, emphasizing the need to strengthen a sense of unconditional belonging and advance educational outcomes for NextUp students. By embracing and applying these strategies and approaches, NextUp programs can create a nurturing environment where students thrive, fostering their holistic growth and empowering them to achieve their full potential, paving the way for a brighter and more equitable future.