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L.A. OPPORTUNITY
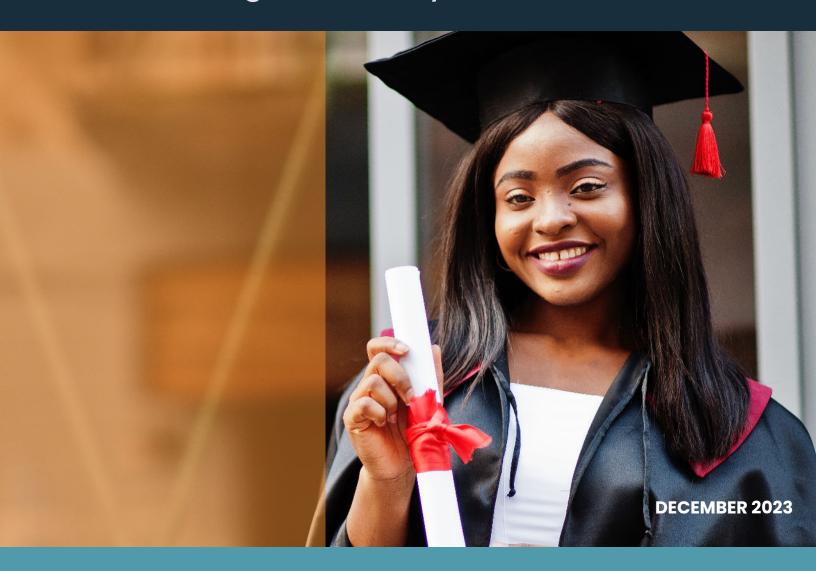YOUTH COLLABORATIVE

LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

VOICES UNVEILED

A Qualitative Exploration of the Postsecondary Journey of Foster Youth in Los Angeles County

DECEMBER 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

The Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) brings together multi-sector partners to address the systemic barriers facing transition age foster youth (TAY) in Los Angeles County. Co-convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights, John Burton Advocates for Youth, and UNITE-LA, the OYC works to achieve systemic change and fulfill the vision that all TAY in Los Angeles County will have the knowledge and skills to allow them to achieve economic mobility and flourish in their personal lives.

In 2021, the OYC was selected by the Aspen Institute to receive funding for the *Building Ecosystems for Youth Opportunity,* with the goal of scaling best practices to increase college access, persistence, and completion for foster youth in Los Angeles County. As part of this initiative, the OYC partnered with the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) to examine the Los Angeles College Promise Program (LACP). While LACP had demonstrated success among the general first-time college population, its success among foster youth was untested. The OYC utilized a human-centered design process to convene partners and gather extensive youth and stakeholder feedback to determine if the LACP was an effective approach for foster youth and to better understand the experience of foster youth transitioning into postsecondary education and the systems that serve them.

Background

Los Angeles County is home to one of the largest child welfare systems in the nation. In March 2023, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) reported that there were 5,028 youth aged 16 through 20 currently in foster care in the county. Furthermore, Los Angeles County's largest school district, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), serves 43% of the county's foster youth, and is a primary feeder district to LACCD.

Access to postsecondary education is key to helping foster youth achieve long-term economic security. Yet just 10% of foster youth in California obtain a two-year or four-year degree by age 23, compared to 36% of their non-foster youth peers.[1] In 2019–2020, just 43.9% of LA County's graduating high school seniors in foster care enrolled in college within 12 months, compared to 62% of their non-foster youth peers.[2]

Other research has found that TAY are often ill-prepared to successfully navigate college. One 2020 study found that about half of foster youth report that they did not receive enough help with college planning. In addition, most foster youth face extreme poverty. Research has found that the most common reason foster youth chose not to attend college was affordability and their need to work.[3] Those who did attend college and later stopped attending commonly identified needing to work full time, college affordability, and child care responsibilities as major reasons for not

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[1] An Early Look at Predictors of College Degree Completion at age 23 for Foster Youth (2021), Chapin Hall.

[2] California Department of Education (CDE) DataQuest, 2019–20

[3] Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of Youth at Age 23 (2020), Chapin Hall.

attending.[4] Further, there is evidence of a direct relationship between working more hours and the likelihood of dropping out of school for students with foster care experience.[5]

LA COLLEGE PROMISE

LACCD's LA College Promise (LACP) program provides two years of free tuition and support to encourage full-time enrollment and timely completion of a postsecondary degree. These supports include a free summer bridge program, priority registration, a free laptop, academic and career coaching, and opportunities for international travel and summer jobs. At the time of this study, students were required to be California residents and full-time, first-time students to participate in LACP.

Participation in LACP is correlated with improvements in rates of enrollment, persistence, and degree and certificate completion. Data that tracked cohorts of LACP students coming from LAUSD over a three-year period starting in 2017 showed a 56% increase in full-time enrollment and a 59% increase in the number of students who completed a degree in two years, compared to first-time, full-time students coming from LAUSD in 2016. Average success data from 2017–2022 indicate that LACP students are 2.5 times more likely to complete their educational goal of certificate, degree, or transfer in three years and three times more likely to successfully complete transfer-level English and math than those not participating.[6]

Despite LACP's successes, few foster youth engage in the program. In 2017, out of the 270 foster youth enrolled in LACCD colleges for the first time, only 39 participated in LACP. However, that group of 39 were two times more likely to complete six units or more and had a higher rate (25%) of persisting into the next semester.[7]

NEXTUP AND GUARDIAN SCHOLARS

NextUp is a state-funded program that provides robust services and support for current and former foster youth attending California community colleges to promote college retention and degree attainment. This includes, but is not limited to, academic counseling, life skills development, community building activities, tutoring, and grants. At the time of this study, NextUp was funded across 46 community colleges throughout the state, including all nine LACCD campuses. Data show that participation in NextUp has a positive impact on term-to-term retention.[8]

Due to the success of the program, the 2022–23 California budget included a significant expansion of funding for the NextUp program that has allowed every college in the state to receive an allocation of funds. To be eligible for NextUp, students must have been in foster care after the age of 13 and be younger than age 26 at program entry. While initially limited to students enrolled in at least nine units, this restriction was removed from the program in recognition of the many barriers that foster youth face. In addition to NextUp, eight of the nine LACCD colleges also provided a campus support program for former foster youth who do not meet the eligibility criteria for NextUp, known as the Guardian Scholars Program.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] Okpych, Nathanael. 2012. "Policy Framework Supporting Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care through College: Review and Recommendations." Children and Youth Services Review 34, no. 7: 1390–1396.

[6] https://www.laccd.edu/Departments/EPIE/Research/Dashboards/Pages/default.asp

[7] https://www.laccd.edu/Departments/EPIE/Research/Dashboards/Pages/default.asp

[8] NextUp Legislative Report, 2020.

Study Design and Methodology

This study focused on former foster youth and those who support their educational journeys. Three groups of foster youth were recruited for this study:

a. Current LACP students who self-identified as current or former foster youth

b. Recent high school graduates with experience in the foster care system either currently attending a community college or not enrolled in school

c. Current high school seniors who are foster youth

All foster youth participants were at least 18 years old. Recruitment flyers were distributed to youth via email and postings. For group A, LACCD emailed students in the LACP. For groups B and C, participants were recruited by the OYC co-convenors through emails. Interested participants filled out an online intake form with basic demographic information and were contacted by the research group to set up either a focus group or interview time. In total there were 26 foster youth participants; seven were individual participants and 19 participated in focus groups. Of these 26 students, 15 were enrolled in community college. Participants received either a $50 or $75 gift card for their participation in the study depending on whether they did an interview or focus group.

The study also included focus groups with adult supporters who work with foster youth. These groups included: LAUSD Student Support Program counselors, LACCD Next Up/ Guardian Scholars' staff, LACP coordinators, Los Angeles County Office of Education Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (LACOE FYSCP) staff, DCFS Extended Foster Care social workers, and DCFS and Probation Department Independent Living Program (ILP) coordinators. There were 32 focus groups conducted with a total of 80 participants. Recruitment for these focus groups was done by JBAY and LACCD through emails.

The findings from the foster youth interviews and focus groups and the adult supporters' focus groups were triangulated to provide an authentic story of foster youths' journeys into higher education.

Youth Findings

Youth with experience in the foster care system provided insight into their educational journeys, including the high school to college transition, college and financial aid application processes, and awareness of campus-based support programs such as LACP and NextUp. The themes from both interviews and focus groups with foster youth are presented below.[9]

Youth in the foster care system face multiple challenges as they approach high school graduation, including:

1 Concerns about stable housing and income

For youth in foster care, completing high school often coincides with exiting foster care or transitioning into Extended Foster Care. Many youth described being unable to focus on applying to college because they were anxious about securing housing and employment. Securing housing and income were stated as the most important priorities during this time, and without having those in place they found it difficult to plan for the future.

"[After my mother withheld my documents and college acceptance letters] I kind of gave up because I was like, I don't know how I'm going to do this; I don't got nothing. I can't work; I can't do this. I had to figure out where to sleep."

"[I] became homeless while attending one college. Programs for housing are age restrictive (18–20 or 21). Whatever college I get in has to be close to housing. Sad that this has to be the priority."

2 Frequent school changes

The majority of participants stated that they attended multiple high schools, including continuation schools, due to changes in their foster care placements. One participant stated that she attended three high schools during 11th and 12th grade, causing her to repeat credits and miss many college outreach activities.

3 Lack of support at continuation or adult school settings

Eleven participants completed high school credits through continuation school or adult school. Some reported missing out on opportunities to engage with college counselors and participate in college-going activities. When asked about whether they received information about college during high school those that stated they did not receive information were more likely to be enrolled in a continuation school.

"I went to several different high schools within the last year. I ended up graduating from [what] was like a continuation school. I had to figure out the college stuff on my own."

4 Parenting responsibilities

At least six participants disclosed becoming a parent while in high school, which delayed applying to college. Access to childcare was one of their top concerns when contemplating enrolling in community college.

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[9] A total of 23 youth participated in the study (seven in individual interviews and 19 in focus groups). Of the 23 participants, 15 were enrolled in college at the time of the study.

5   Lack of financial resources

More than half of the participants (10) were currently working, which impacted their decision to attend college or the number of courses they enrolled in. Others cited access to transportation as a concern.

"If we could be a little more prepared when it comes to housing or other things—accessibility to things we need that are catered and centered on our needs would make it easier financially."

6   Participants did not consistently receive information about postsecondary education and support for completing applications.

Some stated that they did receive information from school counselors or social workers and remember seeing recruitment posters around school, while others stated that they did not receive any information and had to seek out the information for themselves. Of the 10 participants who stated they directly enrolled in college after graduation, each was able to identify an adult who supported them to apply and enroll. This included family members, high school college counselors, social workers, and Independent Living Program (ILP) coordinators. (ILP is a voluntary program within the child welfare system for youth ages 16–21 that provides supportive services and financial resources.) One participant referenced his college center and another stated that their high school had a college day during which everyone filled out applications and completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Those who did not directly enroll in college after graduation were less likely to report receiving information about postsecondary education and support with matriculation into college.

"I feel like I didn't receive information, but I was always looking and asking, but no one came to me. It was always me."

"I feel like if I would have had like more information on it [completing the FAFSA] properly, I wouldn't have gone through a trade [school] first because I put myself in debt."

7   The need to provide documentation of their foster youth status to apply for resources and benefits created barriers to access.

A few participants stated that they did not have the verification required to demonstrate foster youth or former foster youth status. Three of the participants had to go to the children's dependency court to request documentation. Multiple participants stated that they wished they knew which documents they needed prior to exiting the foster care system and which documents the college would require.

"My grandma found a lawyer from the Children's Law Center and that's when I got my social security number and everything like that. They reopen[ed] my case and now I'm able to apply for school... and I got my financial aid."

"All the documentation is hard, like ward of the court letter... It should be easier for us to apply for these grants and aid."

8   The majority of study participants had concerns about attending community college full time, a requirement for the LACP.

Participants who were not enrolled in LACP felt that being a full-time student would be difficult for them for many reasons. The top reasons expressed included dealing with homelessness or housing insecurity, mental health issues that made full-time enrollment feel overwhelming, needing childcare, needing to work full time, and a lack of support to attend full time. The

three who are enrolled in the program did note that attending full time had the added benefit of increased financial aid.

"I would have to take night classes and I don't know if I could be a full-time student in night classes."

"[I couldn't] afford to just go to school, because you need to work to pay for your housing."

"[You might not have the capacity to go full time because] you may be going through something, and you may be struggling."

9. Participants who were not enrolled in LACP were unaware of the program and its benefits.

It should be noted, however, that only four attended high schools in the LACP service area. There was greater awareness of foster youth programs such as Guardian Scholars and NextUp, and participants felt more connected with programs that are specifically for foster youth.

"I chose Guardian Scholars because I have already been helped by people who are in that program. I don't know much about the LA College Promise program."

10. The three students enrolled in LACP expressed satisfaction with the program and the resources that LACP made available.

Participants utilized the program's benefits such as a free laptop, food vouchers, Metro public transportation card, and access to emergency aid. Due to COVID-19 emergency relief funding, students were given $100 from LACP and each of the colleges provided additional money to students in fall 2021.

"I still live with my grandmother and three siblings. Some of the time there's like not a lot of food in the fridge and then we need to go do a market run and it ends up being like $300, for like nothing really. The LA College Promise has really helped my family out with that... providing the laptop and the free tuition, like that really helped tremendously because I wouldn't be able to like afford my classes or get the laptop to even do my first semester, and I would say College Promise has definitely helped me out a lot with that."

11. Students stated that their high school counselors and ILP Coordinators would be their preferred sources of information about college programs.

During the focus group, participants were provided information about LACP and its current outreach strategies. The majority of the participants stated they liked the "acceptance letter" that LACP sends to all LAUSD students from LACCD's district office that is signed by the LACCD chancellor, the LAUSD superintendent, and the mayor of Los Angeles. Participants also liked the contents of the Welcome Package sent along with the acceptance letter, which includes a brochure in multiple languages and a guide on how to enroll. Participants suggested that the LACP Welcome Package be given in person instead of mailed to their homes. Suggestions included providing the letter to high school counselors, social workers, or ILP Transition Coordinators to deliver to the youth.

Adult Supporter Findings

CHILD WELFARE AND K–12 FOSTER YOUTH PROGRAM STAFF

School-aged youth involved in the foster care system interact with both child welfare and K–12 education systems. Seven focus groups were conducted with 39 key stakeholders from across these systems to gain a better understanding of the postsecondary educational support services they provide to foster youth and their perception about the experiences of foster youth transitioning into postsecondary education. Participants included the following representatives:

» Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Extended Foster Care (AB 12) social workers and DCFS Independent Living Program (ILP) Coordinators

» Los Angeles County Probation Department Independent Living Program (ILP) Coordinators

» Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Specialized Student Services (SSS) Counselors with experience serving foster youth

» Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program staff

The themes across these conversations were as follows:

1 **Attention paid to postsecondary transition activities varied, however for many social workers, high caseload numbers and competing priorities limit the amount of time spent on college preparation.**

Participants from each entity stated that they felt they had the knowledge required to discuss information about college, primarily focused on FAFSA support and NextUp/Guardian Scholars programs. Each stakeholder group stated that they must prioritize the immediate needs of their clients, with the top priority being housing, which leaves less time for education-related issues. Three participants shared that they took youth to a college campus and connected them with the NextUp/Guardian Scholars program.

2 **Some partners perceived in many youth a lack of interest in college or a focus on working over education.**

Some expressed that youth often did not have the desire to attend college and others felt that many young people were focused on the immediate need to earn money and did not see a connection between income potential and earning a college degree. These opinions are in contrast to the sentiments expressed by the youth focus group participants as well as prior research, which has demonstrated that by age 19, 93% of California's foster youth have a desire to attend college.[10]

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[10] Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Charles, P., Mikell, D., Stevenson, B., Park, K., Kindle, B., Harty, J., & Feng. H. (2016). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of Youth at Age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

"Youth do not have a clear goal and do not want to go to college. Some youth believe they cannot go to college if they do not know what they want to study or do professionally."

"I have a youth that is dead set on not going to college but wants to be a barber. [They] still need to go to community college. If I can find out more about the program, then I can walk them through it."

(3) While all participants agreed that youth need "handholding" to make it through the application and matriculation process, the "warm handoff" from high school to community college is difficult due to FERPA guidelines that limit the ability to share information.

This is made more complicated by the fact that former foster youth who have exited foster care are no longer eligible for services from either the child welfare or K–12 specialized foster youth support programs. Many participants felt that youth need to learn to advocate for themselves to attend college once they leave foster care or transition to extended foster care.

"We run into FERPA issues with age. Once they are an adult, I can't call on their behalf. You have to teach them to advocate."

(4) The majority of participants were unaware of the LACP and its benefits.

Those who had heard of the program were from LAUSD. During the focus group, all participants were made aware of LACP and its benefits. **Feedback was gathered about their perceptions of the program, and the following barriers to linking foster youth to the program were identified:**

a. The majority of participants stated that the full-time requirement could be an obstacle because students may not be capable of successfully attending full time.

b. Many stated that it was not clear how LACP differed from EOPS or Guardian Scholars and that students may not be aware that they can enroll in more than one support program.

c. One participant noted that the longstanding Board of Governors (BOG) waiver is now called the CA College "Promise Grant" which can be confused with the LA "College Promise" program, which has incentives tied to it beyond the free college tuition.

d. Some participants felt that the requirements for LACP were not clear. For example, it was not clear to some whether eligibility is based on financial need, whether a high school diploma is required, or whether students with disabilities qualify, etc.

e. Housing continues to be a concern for both foster youth and adult supporters, an issue not typically addressed by LACP.

"We are just trying to have them do one class, so they are not overwhelmed."

5 **Partners identified obstacles to the college transition similar to those identified by youth.**

In particular, both groups noted the financial barriers to attending college and the lack of housing. Participants also noted that youth may encounter obstacles accessing vital information for college applications, such as their social security number, birth certificate (required for a state ID), ward of the court letter, and other personal documents. Some noted that unstable housing may result in youth missing communications sent by mail.

"I try to stay connected with the youth. The youth are trying to figure out if they are staying in the house and then figuring out college, it's a lot."

6 **Participants felt that foster youth were not aware of the breadth of postsecondary options, in particular career technical education programs, and that better awareness could drive more youth into postsecondary education.**

Many participants stated that students in foster care see community college as an extension of their high school experience and are not aware of the multiple programs, including career technical education programs, that the colleges offer. Some stated that community colleges could be a more attractive option if they were more career focused. Participants noted that foster youth are likely more aware of for-profit career colleges because of their extensive television advertising. Participants noted that foster youth are often interested in gaining skills or certificates that can lead to entrepreneurial opportunities such as careers in cosmetology, and mechanics.

"It is not that students are not interested in the [community college] program but they are… in a hurry [and] therefore opt to go into [for-profit] trade schools that can do this [quickly] even though they are expensive."

LACP, NEXTUP, AND GUARDIAN SCHOLARS PROGRAM STAFF

Forty staff representing LA College Promise, NextUp, and Guardian Scholars programs across all nine LACCD colleges participated in focus groups. Participants provided insight into their outreach efforts, coordination with other foster youth stakeholders, and approaches to serving foster youth.

1 **Full-time enrollment continues to be a barrier to foster youth participation in LACP.**

Participants noted that foster youth are more likely than other youth to face food and housing insecurity, which forces them to work more hours and/or have inconsistent enrollment. NextUp/Guardian Scholars program staff expressed that many students are thus unable to enroll in 12 units and satisfying the requirement of continuous enrollment can be difficult.

2 **Access to data to identify foster youth is challenging, and the lack of access continues to be a barrier to recruiting foster youth.**

Specifically, the inability of LACCD outreach and/or LACP program staff to identify foster youth directly from LAUSD or other existing systems poses a challenge in effectively serving foster youth by connecting them to appropriate resources and programs from the start. Questions exist within the CCCApply college application and financial aid applications to identify foster youth, however it is difficult to access this information. Not all LACCD support programs have equal access to the information due to FERPA and privacy concerns. Lastly, the LACP staff felt that students wait to self-identify until there is a financial aid issue or they need access to basic needs, and some former foster youth do not ever self-identify throughout their time in community college.

3 **Relationships across organizations are key to effectively serving foster youth.**

Participants revealed that strong relationships between LACCD program staff and high school or community agency personnel are key to effectively recruiting and serving foster youth. Respondents felt that it is more effective when those who work specifically with foster youth, such as high school counselors or community college foster youth program staff, are the ones to provide information to foster youth at the high schools and connect them to an LACCD college. Focus group discussions also revealed that while LACP actively refers students to NextUp/Guardian Scholars when a student is identified as a foster youth, foster youth programs do not regularly make referrals to LACP.

4 **Participants noted the importance of providing opportunities for foster youth students to connect with peers, especially peers with similar experiences and backgrounds.**

It should be a priority, participants said, that funds and human capital be devoted to providing fun and engaging opportunities for foster youth.

Implications

The findings presented above have implications for how the State, local systems and institutions, and individual stakeholders approach supporting foster youth to succeed in college.

✅ Resource shortfalls must be addressed in order to improve college completion rates among foster youth.

Foster youth in this study discussed multiple difficulties during this period of their lives. Many faced housing insecurities as they transitioned out of the foster care system, and childcare was also of concern for parenting youth. Although almost half of those interviewed were in Extended Foster Care, they were concerned with permanent housing and finances. Having a full-time job was a priority for participants, and even participants who were currently attending community college full time were also working. This period of uncertainty makes college decision-making a harder process. Although participants seemed interested in attending college, the majority were not yet enrolled in college.

✅ Systems must be intentional about ensuring youth—particularly those who have changed schools or attend a continuation school—have access to college information and support.

With the passage of Senate Bill 12 in 2018, social workers and probation officers are required to identify a postsecondary education support person or persons to assist foster youth ages 16 or older with their college applications, including career and technical education, and related financial aid. The education support person(s) must be documented in the case plan. It is notable that social workers and K–12 staff shared that providing college information did not appear to be a priority when compared

to issues like housing stability and finding employment, despite the specific requirements of the law. Partner comments about this issue were echoed by the students who shared their experience in focus groups or interviews. While a few participants stated that their social worker or ILP Coordinator provided information to them about college, the majority who did receive information received it from their high school college counselor.

As documented in the findings, those who attended continuation school were less likely to receive information about college or financial aid. Students who changed schools reported missing opportunities to connect with high

school counselors and participate in college going activities.

Many of the youth participants in the interviews and focus groups were unsure about the cost of college and the resources available to them as former foster youth. Although this sample size was small, it is meaningful that participants were clearly more aware of campus programs that have historically supported foster youth in college, such as NextUp and Guardian Scholars, and financial aid programs such as the Chafee Grant. However, most were unaware that students in community college could be enrolled in multiple programs at the same time, such as NextUp, LACP, and EOPS. Adult supporters who were most successful in providing information relied on relationships with NextUp and Guardian Scholars programs to help their clients navigate the community college system and enroll them into the support services for foster youth.

It is vital that all stakeholders have up-to-date information about postsecondary education, including college support programs, and communicate this information to foster youth.

✅ Full-time requirements create barriers to access for many foster youth.

For those participants who were not in LACP, the idea of being a full-time student seemed difficult because of life stressors including housing insecurity, mental health issues, needing to work, and anxiety around being a full-time student. These stressors were validated by the stakeholders who work with foster youth. Even among students who were LACP participants, all were working, indicating that LACP did not provide financial resources adequate to students' full need.

✅ LACP is not viewed as a significant resource for foster youth.

Many adult supporters were not aware of LACP. While they were not all located in LACCD's service area they did not discuss the availability of College Promise programs more broadly, indicating that many stakeholders are not aware that College Promise programs exist at all California community colleges. When asked how LACP could increase and target their outreach, youth stated that the program could provide information to social workers, and that it could also be helpful to receive the acceptance letter from a social worker or counselor in person rather than by mail. Another opportunity for recruitment is sharing information with participants in other programs in which foster youth participate such as NextUp, EOPS, CARE and Disabled Students Services and Programs (DSPS).

As noted above, adult supporters also felt that being a full-time student would be challenging for foster youth, and some stated they thought that only a few foster youth would be successful in college.

✅ Protocols that support more robust information sharing across systems can help link students to services.

As noted in the findings above, it is challenging to access data to identify foster youth, which continues to present a barrier to the recruitment of foster youth. Given FERPA restrictions, K–12 and child welfare systems could obtain releases from foster youth in order to make referrals to college programs. Notably, only a few youth participants expressed hesitation about disclosing their status as foster youth or former foster youth. Although those who were hesitant about disclosing did not want to be singled out, they were interested in special programs for them, including financial resources.

Recommendations

The implications of the findings from foster youth and their adult supporters point to opportunities for policy and practice changes that could improve the postsecondary educational outcomes of youth in foster care.

STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

❯ Establish a financial aid program that covers the full unmet need for foster youth.

Youth expressed both a lack of awareness about existing financial aid programs and concerns with college affordability and the need to work. While California has invested in financial aid programs for foster youth, significant unmet need remains. California should invest in creating debt-free college for foster youth by establishing a financial aid program that covers 100% of the remaining unmet need after accounting for existing federal, state, and institutional aid. Given that 82% of foster youth who pursue postsecondary education are enrolled at a community college, this program should be made available to students pursuing an associate's degree, certificate, bachelor's, or transfer pathway at a community college as well as students pursuing a bachelor's degree at a California State University or University of California institution.[11] Furthermore, according to data available in the CalPASS Plus system, during the 2021-2022 academic year, of those students who identified as foster youth at the California community colleges, 75% enrolled in fewer than 12 units. Due to a myriad of challenges that youth with experience in foster care often face, not all students are able to enroll full-time. Therefore, this program should not impose a requirement that students attend full-time, and should allow for the funding to be prorated to support students attending with fewer than 12 units.

❯ Invest in ongoing public funding for dedicated postsecondary educational support services for youth in middle school and high school.

While there are often many adults involved in the life of a foster youth, findings from this study indicate that many foster youth experience a lack of support with college planning. This is further substantiated by a 2016 study that found that 46% of foster youth in California report that they do not receive enough help with college planning.[12] While some community-based organizations (CBOs) throughout the state provide high-touch college access services for foster youth, their reach and scale is limited, leaving most foster youth without access to these critical services. One recent study looked at outcomes of foster youth enrolled in six different college access CBOs. Of youth enrolled in those programs, 94% graduated high school compared to 58% of all foster youth in California, and 82% enrolled in postsecondary education compared to just 48% of all foster youth in California.[13] An investment in ongoing public funding is necessary to ensure that all foster youth

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[11] Laura Packard Tucker, Devlin Hanson, Michael Pergamit, Jonah Norwitt, Shannon Gedo, Foster Care, Postsecondary Education, and Financial Aid in California, The Urban Institute, 2023.

[12] CalYouth at 21 (2016).

[13] Destination Graduation, The Foster Youth Pre-College Collective, 2023.

throughout the state receive equitable access to high-touch individualized support based on best practices that help students graduate high school and successfully pursue postsecondary education.

❯ Provide additional flexibility to programs that target foster youth to improve services.

Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs, housed within each County Office of Education, are tasked with coordinating services across their local districts and providing technical assistance to these districts. Current law limits the degree to which these programs can offer direct services such as tutoring, educational case management, and college preparation. Barriers to offering direct services should be eliminated so that these programs can more easily supplement services provided by Local Education Agencies (LEA).

❯ Provide permanent funding to address homelessness and establish youth set-asides in future state funding, where appropriate.

Youth and adults identified housing as a top priority and concern for achieving a postsecondary education. California has made a series of one-time investments into the Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention Program (HHAP), which provides funding to Continuums of Care, counties, and the 13 largest cities, including Los Angeles, to support a variety of homelessness interventions. This funding requires that local jurisdictions invest at least 10% of their HHAP allocation in addressing youth homelessness, which has resulted in a 21% decrease in youth homelessness.[14] The continuity of HHAP is critical to sustaining and expanding on this progress. To address

the issue of youth homelessness among former foster youth and remove barriers to postsecondary educational attainment, ongoing long-term investments into HHAP are necessary.

❯ Require all social workers and probation officers to receive mandatory training on how to support foster youth in enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education.

To ensure that all staff are appropriately trained to support and encourage youth into postsecondary education, child welfare and probation departments should implement mandatory training on this topic as a strategy to help increase direct enrollment into postsecondary education.

❯ Invest in additional resources to support parenting students attending community college.

State policies should be explored to reduce barriers for parenting students, such as providing subsidized childcare for foster youth enrolled in college, expanding free childcare centers on community college campuses for low-income students, or increasing funding for family housing for current and former foster youth.

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[14] Trending in the Right Direction: How State Investments Have Decreased Homelessness Among Unaccompanied Youth in California, John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2023.

LOCAL POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

❯ Implement the provisions of Senate Bill (SB) 12 to ensure that all foster youth ages 16 and older are connected to a postsecondary education support person.

In 2018, SB 12 passed, requiring social workers and probation officers to identify a postsecondary education support person or persons to assist youth ages 16 and older with their college and financial aid applications, including career and technical education pathways. This legal mandate has been poorly implemented across child welfare and probation agencies. Agencies should ensure that their internal policies reflect this requirement, line staff are aware of this requirement and know how to appropriately document it within the case plan, and safeguards are in place to track compliance.

❯ Develop local practices to increase participation of foster youth in dual enrollment courses.

Dual enrollment, which allows a student to enroll in high school and college at the same time, has long been acknowledged as a powerful strategy to increase high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation rates particularly for underrepresented students such as students of color and first-generation students. This suggests that it may be beneficial to youth in foster care as well. To effectively increase enrollment of foster youth in dual enrollment programs, colleges need to invest in hiring and training dedicated staff to provide high-touch support to these students to ensure successful onboarding and retention. This

requires collaboration and dedicated time to build strong relationships across institutions, including child welfare agencies, high schools, and higher education institutions.[15] Recent changes to NextUp eligibility requirements allow these programs to serve dual enrollment students, a strategy that should be further explored.

❯ Establish local protocols to ensure a warm handoff of foster youth into campus-based foster youth support programs before high school graduation.

State funded campus-based support programs, such as NextUp, can assist with the college matriculation process, even before a student graduates high school. Child welfare, the County Office of Education, local education agencies, and community colleges should develop a streamlined system to refer students to campus-based support programs prior to high school graduation. This warm handoff can help ensure that students are connected to resources to assist with the college matriculation process, including accessing financial aid, and other supportive services to prevent "summer melt."

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[15] Dual Enrollment for Foster Youth: Toward Effective Practice, Career Ladders Project. February 2022.

❯ Develop a student-friendly universal referral process to streamline enrollment and participation of foster youth in multiple community college support programs.

Youth in the foster care system have intersectional identities and experiences, and often benefit from multiple support programs at a community college campus. This can include the LA College Promise as well as programs that serve undocumented students, LGBTQ+ students, formerly incarcerated students, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, or Black students. However, accessing these multiple programs can be burdensome on a student if there are multiple applications, tedious intake processes, and duplicative program or counseling requirements.

To ensure student-centered programming, colleges should create a universal referral process to support streamlined student access to multiple programs, including a question to flag for foster youth status. Additionally, this universal referral form should allow for students to provide their consent to share their information about participation in multiple programs to help facilitate better collaboration and coordination between campus programs. Lastly, for students enrolled in multiple programs, programs should identify a "lead" program to satisfy counseling session requirements (e.g., NextUp, DSPS, Umoja) and lift the burden of multiple program requirements while maintaining access to all program services.

❯ Improve statewide marketing materials and promotion of existing financial aid programs available to foster youth in California.

While students in this study could identify some resources for which they were eligible, not a single participant could name all the resources for which they were eligible. The California Student Aid Commission and California Community College system should collaborate to improve the marketing and promotion of existing financial aid programs and resources available to foster youth in California to send a clear and powerful message that college is possible.

❯ Child welfare and probation agencies should align the transitional housing application process with the academic calendar to improve direct enrollment of foster youth into college.

Transitional Housing Placement for Non-Minor Dependents (THP-NMD) is a foster care placement for youth ages 18 to 21 who are participating in extended foster care as non-minor dependents. THP-NMD provides housing and a wide range of supportive services, including case management, counseling, job training, and educational support. Youth are not eligible for entry into the program until they are 18, and county policy requires agencies to place applicants within 30 days. Therefore, in Los Angeles, youth are not encouraged to apply more than 30 days prior to their 18th birthday. This can be challenging for high school seniors to plan and secure housing for college if their birthdays do not align with the college application timeline. The application process should be expanded to allow high school seniors pursuing postsecondary education to apply earlier in order to appropriately plan and secure housing in alignment with their college plans.

❯ Establish a county policy to refer all Non-Minor Dependents without a reliable housing arrangement at exit from foster care, to receive an FYI housing voucher.

Los Angeles County DCFS currently has partnerships with three Public Housing Authorities to offer 36-month Housing Choice Vouchers to youth through the Family Unification Program (FUP) and Foster Youth to Independence Initiative (FYI). These FYI vouchers can be requested by the county child welfare agency (LA DCFS) from the housing authority on an on-demand (rolling) basis throughout the year. Youth ages 18 through 24 may receive a voucher if they have already left care or if they are leaving within 90 days. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provides the voucher (rental subsidy funding) to the housing authority within 60 business days following the request. This allows all youth in the process of transitioning out of care to be provided an opportunity to move into stable, affordable housing, including those high school seniors pursuing postsecondary education.

❯ NextUp and LACP should utilize relationship-based approaches to support students in their programs.

A variety of theoretical frameworks exist that are grounded in the fundamental concept that relationships are critical in promoting student success, particularly for students with a history of trauma. These include, but are not limited to, "Trauma-Informed Care," "Healing Centered Engagement," and the "Youth Thrive Framework." Programs should review their internal policies and procedures to ensure that systems and training for staff are in place to cultivate transformational, not transactional, relationships and a sense of belonging for students. JBAY's publication, From Theory to Practice: Fostering Relationship-Based Approaches in NextUp Programs may be a helpful tool for practitioners.

❯ Increase investments and supports for youth in foster care attending continuation schools.

In LA County, youth in foster care who attend alternative schools have lower rates of direct college enrollment.[16] A recent report from the National Center for Youth Law examined the outcomes of students in foster care attending continuation schools operated by County Offices of Education (COE), and found that foster youth are disproportionately overrepresented in these schools.[17] This report offers several recommendations which should be further explored both locally and statewide, including investing in tailored, high-quality programming in the alternative school setting as well as improving transition planning and carefully supervised transfers between alternative and traditional schools. Additionally, all alternative schools should offer and make accessible a full range of "A-G" courses that allow students to pursue admission to four-year public colleges and universities. Lastly, there should be increased investments that provide specific supports to assist youth in foster care and youth formerly in foster care who are in COE schools.

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[16] CDE Data Quest Dashboard, 2019-2022, College-Going Rates

[17] Decoding Alternative Education: Student Demographics, Coursework and Budgeting in the Five Largest California County Offices of Education & Tools for Transparency, National Center for Youth Law, East Bay Community Law Center and ACLU of Southern California, 2023.