



RESEARCH REPORT

A Look at NextUp Implementation in California

Staff and Student Perspectives on a Campus Support Program for Students with Foster Care History

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A Look at NextUp Implementation in California

The majority of young people in foster care want to go to college, yet they enroll in and graduate from college at lower rates than their peers. The barriers for these potential students are numerous and are often linked to a lack of familial, social, and financial support. Campus support programs aim to address this issue and provide academic, social, emotional, and financial supports to postsecondary students with foster care history.

In California, the NextUp campus support program provides a wide array of resources and supports for students with foster care history attending California community colleges. The NextUp program began in 2014 and has grown over time. Most recently, the 2022–23 California budget expanded California’s investment in the program, allowing all but one of the 116 community colleges in the state to receive an allocation of funds.¹ This resulted in 69 community colleges receiving NextUp funding for the first time in January 2023.²

Our study examines the implementation of NextUp in campuses around the state of California following this most recent round of funding. By surveying NextUp programs and speaking with NextUp coordinators, counselors, and students, we sought to better understand NextUp implementation, student experiences with NextUp, and variation across NextUp programs.

Background

In California, more than 18,000 young people who self-identified as having foster care history were enrolled in community colleges in the fall of 2023.³ But the pathway to enrollment and graduation is difficult for these students, who face a unique set of challenges in attending and graduating from higher education.

Postsecondary Education and Graduation for Youth with Foster Care History

The vast majority of young people with foster care history want to attend and graduate from college (Courtney et al. 2016; Courtney, Terao, and Bost 2004; McMillen et al. 2003; Unrau, Font, and Rawls

2012). For those who do attend college, increased education, especially degree achievement, leads to higher incomes and employment rates (Okpych and Courtney 2014). However, these young people are less likely than their peers to enroll in college (Courtney et al. 2007; Davis 2006; Hanson et al. 2022), to enroll in four-year schools (Courtney et al. 2007; Okpych et al. 2020; Hanson et al. 2022), or to graduate from college (Day et al. 2011; Okpych et al. 2020; Hanson et al. 2022). Fewer than 10 percent of young people with a foster care history have a postsecondary degree by age 24 (Courtney et al. 2011), and fewer than 3 percent have a bachelor's degree (Pecora et al. 2005; Hanson et al. 2022).

Challenges in Applying for and Attending College for Youth with Foster Care History

These lower rates of enrollment and graduation may be linked to the unique challenges that young people with foster care history face when considering, applying for, and attending college. Research has shown that experiencing instability in foster care, repeating grades, and early parenthood negatively impact the likelihood of enrolling in college for young people with foster care history (Courtney and Hook 2017; Okpych and Courtney 2017; Okpych, Courtney, and Dennis 2017). After enrollment, barriers to persistence and degree completion for students with foster care history include mental health challenges, needing to work, being a parent, and facing economic hardships (Courtney et al. 2011; Courtney et al. 2020; Geiger and Beltran 2017; Okpych and Courtney 2021). However, there are some protective factors that make college enrollment more likely, such as more time in extended foster care (for young people who have aged out of care), higher reading ability, higher high school grades, educational aspirations, and connections to resourceful adults (Font and Palmer 2024; Courtney and Hook 2017; Okpych and Courtney 2017, Okpych and Courtney 2019; Okpych, Courtney, and Dennis 2017).

The cost of postsecondary education is another barrier for young people with foster care experience looking to get a college education. Many students with foster care history must work to pay for tuition and out-of-pocket costs, which can require balancing school and work (Courtney et al. 2018). Students with foster care history have much lower family incomes to help pay for the rising cost of college, and they face many competing fiscal demands. Youth aging out of foster care are usually exiting the foster care system while they are entering or enrolled in their postsecondary education, so they must house themselves, pay for their expenses, and find aid or pay for schooling themselves (Okpych 2012; Hernandez and Naccarato 2010; Freundlich and Avery 2006). Research suggests that financial supports such as receiving financial aid, receiving room and board financial assistance, state tuition waivers, and Education and Training Vouchers are associated with higher rates of postsecondary enrollment and persistence (Geiger and Okpych 2022; Gross et al. 2023; Hanson et al. 2022).

Campus Support Programs for Youth with Foster Care History

Campus support programs (CSPs) can play a role in addressing the social, educational, and financial challenges faced by students with foster care history. There is mounting evidence of CSPs' positive impacts on student outcomes. Across the country, studies of CSPs have found potential benefits for students with foster care history including improved academic performance (Collins et al. 2023), increased graduation rates (Unrau et al. 2017), and positive employment outcomes (Schelbe et al. 2024). Some preliminary evidence shows that academic support, access to other college or community resources, and financial supports are beneficial for student participants (Geiger et al. 2018; Hernandez, 2012). Studies also highlight the important role of individual liaisons to guide students, with students reporting that such relationships are critical to their college success (Unrau et al. 2017; Watt et al. 2023). However, emerging evidence also finds broad challenges that may hinder CSPs' success. Students may be hesitant to engage in programs or disclose their foster care history due to lasting stigma (Kinarsky, 2017; Cheatham et al. 2021), and programs can be hindered by inconsistent or unreliable funding or institutional support (Collins et al. 2023).

There is also emerging evidence on the role, benefits, and challenges of CSPs in California. The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) found 52 percent of college students with foster care experience participating in the study had engaged with a CSP, and CSP involvement increased the expected odds of college persistence (Okpych et al. 2020). An outcome evaluation of the Guardian Scholars CSP at San Francisco State University found higher retention and graduation rates for students in the Guardian Scholar program compared with both the general population of students at the university and public university students nationwide (Lenz-Rashid, 2018).⁴ Students participating in California CSPs have highlighted the benefits of the programs' financial supports and their meaningful connections with program staff, especially the staff's continual support to assist with both academic and personal challenges (Lopez et al. 2022; Ortega 2022). CSP staff also emphasize the programs' ability to deliver critical advising services, financial support, educational programming, and community events (Whitman, 2023).

However, similar to other programs nationwide, California CSPs face program delivery challenges. First, they experience significant challenges in maintaining student engagement and persistence in the program (Lopez et al. 2022; Okpych et al. 2020). And second, California CSPs experience challenges meeting the multiple needs of students and barriers to delivery, such as administrative delays or a lack of community partners (Lopez et al. 2022; Okpych et al. 2020).

NextUp at California Community Colleges

This study seeks to contribute to the emerging research on CSPs in California and nationwide by looking at the implementation of the NextUp program. NextUp seeks to provide support and services to students in California community colleges who have foster care history. These supports can include help with books and supplies, transportation, tutoring, educational planning, life skills, financial planning, food, emergency housing, and referrals to other services on campus and in the community. In academic year 2023–24, each NextUp program is funded with a base allocation plus either \$4,250 per student served (for campuses with “original NextUp programs,” which were established before the 2023–24 academic year) or \$4,250 per student for 46 percent of self-identified eligible students (for campuses with “new NextUp programs,” which received funding after January 2023 (California Community College Chancellor’s Office 2024)).

Students are eligible for NextUp if they are a current or former foster youth whose final exit from foster care was not before they turned 13; if they are under age 26 at the start of the academic year when they first enter the program; and if they are enrolled in nine units, planning to enroll in nine units, or agree to an academic plan leading toward enrollment in nine units. Working in concert with other supports, such as the CSPs Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) and Guardian Scholars,⁵ the NextUp program aims to provide expanded supports to and reduce barriers to support for students with foster care history.⁶ Although NextUp services differ across campuses, programs generally aim to provide counseling, connections, and financial supports that have been beneficial at CSPs across the country.

Many of the 69 programs that received the new NextUp funding had an existing foster youth support program. However, 15 had no existing program in place when they received the most recent round of NextUp funding. Therefore, there was no existing infrastructure to support foster youth on campus, design staffing plans, support outreach and recruitment, or provide guidance on program models.

Study Details

To better understand the NextUp implementation across the state, we reached out to NextUp coordinators, counselors, and students, and we focused our study on two primary research questions:

- How are campuses implementing NextUp? And how does this vary by college subgroup (e.g., rural versus urban; new programs, returning programs, and campuses with preexisting programs)?
- What have student experiences been with NextUp? And how does this vary by college subgroup (e.g., rural versus urban campuses; new versus returning NextUp programs, and campuses with other student support programs vs campuses without)?

Through a survey, interviews, and focus groups, we sought to learn how California community colleges were implementing the NextUp program, the challenges associated with those efforts, and promising practices for facilitating implementation and serving students with foster care experience.

To begin, we designed and fielded a survey of NextUp coordinators at all active NextUp programs across the state. The survey inquired about program characteristics (including service delivery, participants, and staffing) and program activities (such as outreach, engagement, and financial supports). The survey also asked for respondents' opinions on their campus's success in addressing challenges related to collaboration, service delivery, program staffing, and data availability. We administered the survey from April to May 2024 and received responses from 86 (75 percent) of the 115 NextUp programs.⁷ Of the 86 programs that responded, about half (53 percent) were "new NextUp programs," which first received NextUp funding after January 2023. Of the survey respondents, 16 percent worked at programs located in LA, and 42 percent in another metro area. The majority of respondents were either NextUp coordinators or directors who oversaw the program.

We randomly selected nine programs stratified by their urbanicity, location, and NextUp implementation status (i.e., new programs, which were established in the 2023/2024 academic year or original programs, which were established before the 2023/2024 academic year) for in-depth interviews with NextUp coordinators and counselors. Among new NextUp programs, we also considered whether a campus had a preexisting foster youth support program that preceded the new NextUp program. We selected multiple NextUp programs in Los Angeles County because the county is home to over half of California's foster care population. If a selected program did not respond to a request for interviews, we randomly selected another program with the same urbanicity and NextUp implementation status to replace it until at least eight NextUp programs responded.

In all, we conducted interviews with nine NextUp coordinators and counselors across nine campuses. In individual interviews, coordinators and counselors were asked about their role, their NextUp program's services and participants, and their thoughts on the NextUp implementation at their

campus (such as any specific challenges or successes they identified). We also explored their perceptions of possible differences between NextUp programs at different campuses.

To understand the perspective of NextUp participants, we conducted 13 virtual focus groups with 41 students participating in NextUp programs across the state. Students from 13 different campuses participated and 34 percent of students interviewed attended one of the campuses sampled for coordinator interviews. These focus groups often included students from different programs to facilitate exchanges of information. Students were asked about their participation in NextUp, the services they received through the program, and their perception of the program, staff, and services. Students also discussed what the NextUp program could do to better serve participants across topics such as outreach and service coordination.

Findings

Below we describe what we learned from our NextUp program survey and from our interviews and focus groups with NextUp program coordinators and students. First, we describe the services received, then we discuss student engagement, student experiences, NextUp program implementation, and student success and data.

NextUp Services

NextUp services primarily consist of high-touch support and financial assistance, but some services vary by campus.

We asked NextUp coordinators and students about the services offered by the program. They spoke about what services were available at their programs and which services were most impactful and needed. Coordinators and students also highlighted areas where NextUp could be doing more. As mentioned in the overview, NextUp seeks to serve students in California community colleges who have history with foster care and to provide support and services to these students. The program rules provide a lot of flexibility, and NextUp generally provide counseling and financial supports.

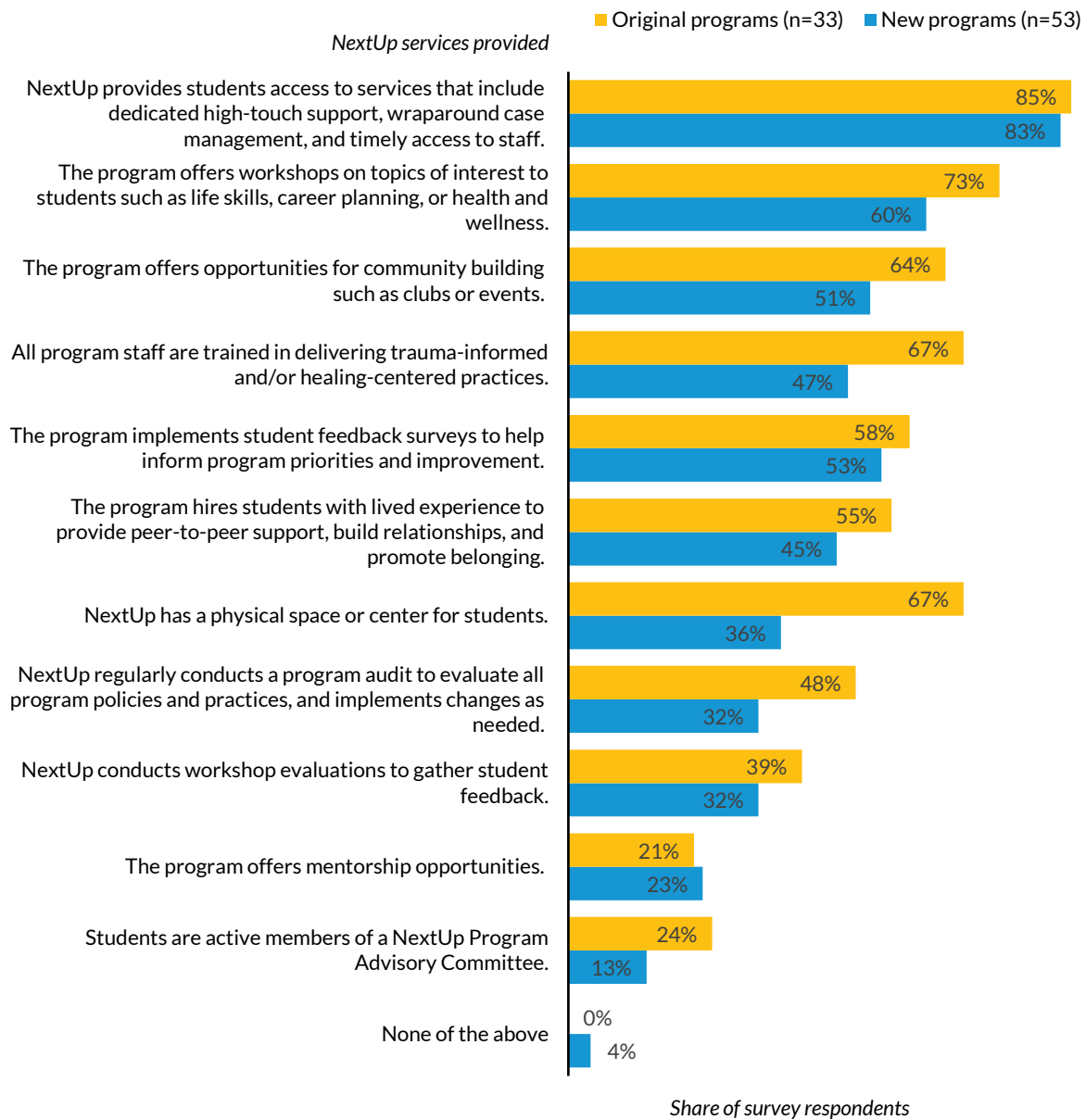
In our survey results, almost all programs report providing students access to services that include dedicated high-touch support, wraparound case management, and timely access to staff (84 percent). The majority of programs also:

- offer workshops on topics of interest to students such as life skills, career planning, or health and wellness;
- offer opportunities for community building such as clubs or events;
- train all program staff in delivering trauma-informed and/or healing-centered practices; and
- implement student feedback surveys to help inform program priorities and improvement.

Figure 1 shows among those who responded to the survey, the share of NextUp programs that offered each service by implementation status (i.e., original or new NextUp program).

FIGURE 1

Program Model Characteristics for NextUp Programs by Implementation Status



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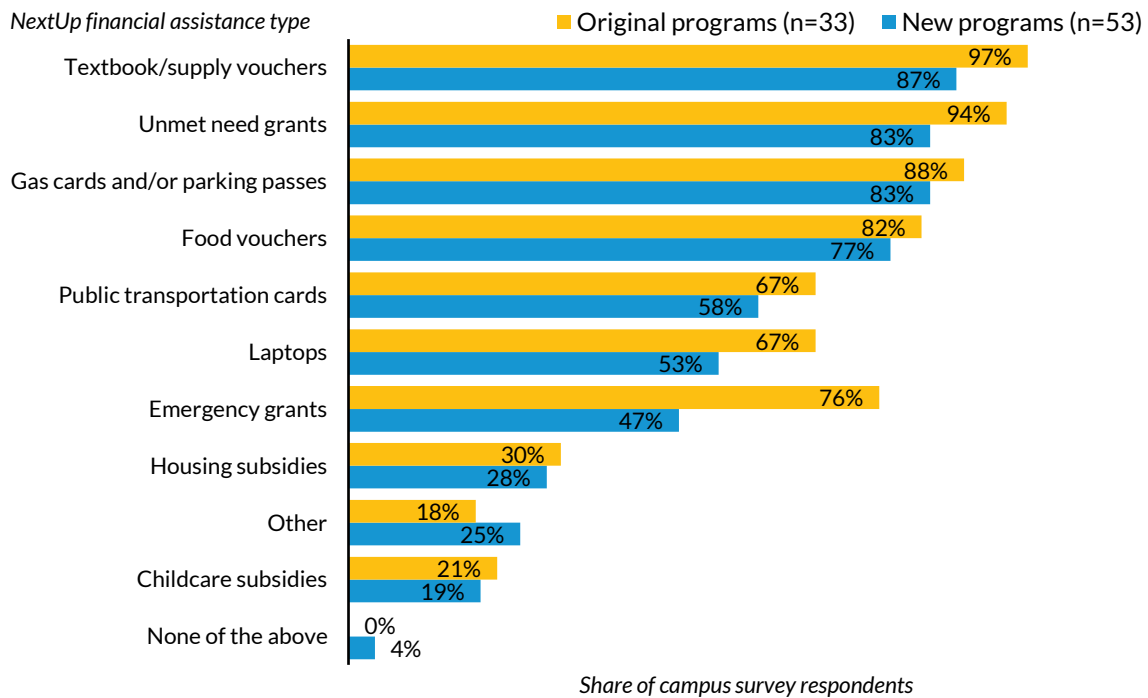
Source: Survey of NextUp programs

Notes: Survey was distributed to all NextUp programs. Out of the 115 programs, 86 programs responded. New NextUp programs began receiving funding in January 2023 or later. Original NextUp programs began receiving funding prior to January 2023.

Students and coordinators at every campus we spoke with mentioned financial support, but the amount, method, and frequency of that support varied. Students most often mentioned receiving book

vouchers; some form of direct aid—such as a gas card, food card, Walmart gift card, or Visa card; or a NextUp grant. In student focus groups, several students said that they only received the grant and wished they could receive some of the extra supports like book vouchers or gift cards. Programs reported varied types of financial assistance via the survey (figure 2). For almost all types of financial aid assistance, original programs were more likely than new programs to provide aid (figure 2). The biggest difference between original and new NextUp programs was in emergency grants. Three-quarters of original programs reported providing emergency grants compared with about half of new programs.

FIGURE 2
Financial Assistance Provided by NextUp Programs by Implementation Status



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Source: Author’s analysis of survey of NextUp programs.

Notes: Survey was distributed to all NextUp programs. Out of the 115 programs, 86 programs responded. New NextUp programs began receiving funding in January 2023 or later. Original NextUp programs began receiving funding before January 2023.

STUDENT NEEDS

NextUp programs prioritize assessing and meeting students’ specific needs. Students had both financial (e.g., housing, money for books) and nonfinancial needs (e.g., academic, mental health, community).

Coordinators mentioned two modes of assessing students' needs. Some programs do a formal, written assessment when a student joins the program, while others collect the information through more casual conversations with the students. All coordinators mentioned the importance of talking to students and building a relationship to understand how NextUp can best serve them.

"I just listen to them, when they come in and they talk. I have lived experience; I can relate to them.... I'm real with them and I talk with them. I just listen to what they say."

—NextUp coordinator

Coordinators gave varied responses when asked about students' most pressing needs. Some focused on economic hardships: four coordinators mentioned housing, while only one coordinator each mentioned food insecurity, child care, and transportation. Coordinators who mentioned students' financial difficulties also often mentioned program difficulties in service provision, such as not having enough staff. Others talked about the difficulties for students with foster care history engaging and persisting in school. Two-thirds of coordinators raised mental health challenges as the most pressing student need, making it the most commonly mentioned need. Four coordinators raised academic or personal barriers as students' most pressing need, speaking about students' challenges with managing schoolwork—especially time management—and with transitioning to adulthood, including the need for higher financial literacy. Students mentioned these difficulties as well as the desire to be more connected to their community and other students. All coordinators recognized that this group of students has a unique set of needs that NextUp should address, often noting that their needs were different than students in other similar programs, such as EOPS.

STANDARD AND INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORTS

NextUp programs provided both standard and individualized services. The programs also provide opportunities for community, referrals to other services, and advocacy on behalf of students.

When coordinators spoke about providing services to students, they typically mentioned two types of supports: standard and individualized. Standard supports might include monthly gas cards and a grant every semester. Individualized supports are tailored to a need in a specific student's life. Some examples include helping a student pay for a car repair that was keeping them from getting to work and school, paying a student's rent for a month to prevent homelessness, providing supports for a student's

study abroad experience, and helping a student schedule a training class needed for their desired career path.

NextUp coordinators spoke of learning about these needs primarily through talking with students. They reiterated the importance of establishing and strengthening trusting relationships with students. Otherwise, they said they might not hear about these needs. Overall, students valued the ability of the NextUp program to meet their needs.

“[Program staff] provide you with anything that you need, and if they can’t find it, they email somebody to see if they could go in that direction [to help you find] what you’re looking for.”
—student in NextUp

Below, we list common NextUp supports mentioned in the interviews and focus groups:

- **Academic counseling and supports.** All coordinators mentioned providing some kind of counseling, with most focusing on helping a student establish and work toward an educational plan. Students voiced appreciation for having someone keep them on track with their goals and pushing them. Coordinators mentioned several functions these counseling sessions can serve, including educational planning. Coordinators often mentioned the importance of just listening to what the student was going through in their life and making space for “the other stuff.” Advocating for students is also common—either directly communicating with professors or supporting students to advocate for themselves.

“Counselors that are too focused on academics [are a barrier]. Students come with stuff, and you just got to get comfortable with the stuff. Most of the time, we just talk about the stuff, and the school stuff is secondary. That’s really important. Make students know that they can always come back.”
—NextUp coordinator

- **Financial supports.** Many students and coordinators mentioned regular grants for students. The amount and frequency of these grants varied by campus. Some coordinators mentioned challenges with the schedule of payments; for example, when NextUp disbursed grants at the start of a school year, students struggled with making the funds last for a whole semester. Another challenge sometimes arose with keeping financial supports within the amount of the student’s unmet need. All financial aid provided to a student (including any NextUp financial support) cannot exceed the student’s unmet need defined in their financial aid package. Only a couple coordinators mentioned this issue, but one stated that by the end of the semester, only a small percentage of NextUp students continued getting monthly financial support from the program because they were the only students who still had unmet need as defined by the school. Financial support often took the form of vouchers, with some programs providing monthly food, transportation, or gas cards to students. Coordinators and students often mentioned NextUp providing the funding to cover a necessary expense. These expenses were difficult for the student to afford (e.g., rent, school fees, medical costs) and sometimes an urgent need.
- **Collaboration with financial aid offices.** Collaboration with financial aid offices was a common service for NextUp students. We heard about these services in interviews and focus groups, and through the survey. About half of NextUp programs who responded to the survey said they engaged in these financial aid collaboration strategies:

 - » The financial aid office provides students with expedited assistance to essential financial aid resources. (60 percent)
 - » NextUp students can receive same-day assistance with financial aid applications and distribution to reduce barriers to access. (51 percent)
 - » NextUp staff partner with the financial aid office to host Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and California Dream Act Application (CADAA) completion workshops for incoming students. (49 percent)
 - » NextUp staff have Webgrants access to view the Chafee roster, the Foster Youth Access Award custom report, and to verify eligibility for NextUp students. (42 percent)

Smaller shares of programs reported other types of collaboration with the financial aid office. Almost a third of programs reported that the financial aid staff partner with NextUp to provide budgeting and money management workshops for program participants (29 percent). About 10 percent reported having financial aid personnel colocated with NextUp. The share of programs providing these services did not vary widely across original versus new programs.

“My program is great at connecting us to the financial aid office. If [a NextUp staff member] doesn’t have the answers, [they] will have someone from the financial aid office sit down to talk to me. It’s way better than going at it alone because the financial aid office doesn’t usually put a lot of effort into helping students.”

—student in NextUp

- **Housing support.** Housing was cited by a few coordinators as students’ most common material need, but those same coordinators also said how difficult it was to meet that need. In our focus groups, students mentioned the challenge of affordable housing. A couple of students explained how the NextUp program either connected them with a homeless shelter, helped provide them with extra supports while they were in a shelter, or directly paid for emergency housing (such as a hotel room). On the survey, 61 percent of programs indicated that they have relationships with local homeless service providers to refer students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.
- **Communal NextUp area.** Having a physical space for students and staff to meet was often cited by staff and students as a positive feature. However, not every campus had this space available. Staff and students in programs that did not have a dedicated space wished their program had its own space. On the survey, the largest difference between original and new programs was whether they had a physical space for students. Two thirds of original programs have a dedicated space compared with only one third of new programs. Coordinators who had a communal meeting space for their students expressed how this space served as a touch point for connecting and building relationships with students. Students appreciated any communal space as a place to connect, study, and get snacks and coffee.
- **Service referrals.** Students we spoke to were split on how effective NextUp was at making referrals to other services either on campus or in the community. Some students spoke of their NextUp counselor as a person they could reliably go to find out about services, but some could not remember an instance when NextUp had connected them to another service. Frequently cited on-campus referrals were to financial aid, EOPS, Guardian Scholars, accessibility services, and mental health services; frequently cited off-campus referrals were to housing support, behavioral health, other foster support programs, and food insecurity services (e.g. food

pantries and CalFresh). On the survey, 80 percent of programs said that they identify and partner with relevant community-based agencies to meet students' needs.

When asked which service was most impactful, many students mentioned financial supports. Some felt that the semester grants made school possible, while others found the smaller financial supports (e.g., food, gift cards, vouchers, more regular monthly grants) more helpful because of their regularity. Some students felt that meeting with the NextUp counselors made the biggest difference and appreciated that someone was checking in on them and making sure they were on top of things.

"I currently live in a homeless shelter. The Uber gift cards really helped me get to and from school. The gift cards for food also helped. Sometimes we struggle with food and it's hard to focus and do your schoolwork. That's something that I really like about the program."
—student in NextUp

Although students and coordinators said housing was a need, coordinators often mentioned that there was a lack of support in general for all students, especially in areas with a high cost of housing. Some students did not think any extra supports were needed, but some did say they would appreciate getting more financial support. This was common especially in focus groups with students from multiple programs where the amount of financial support varied. Students also cited community as one of their needs for which more supports could be provided and offered creative ideas to foster community, including creating a welcoming space (for programs that do not have one) and stocking it with snacks, taking more field trips, and volunteering as a group with local community organizations.

"Housing is huge. Everything else we can deal with, but housing is such an immediate need and there are no immediate solutions to any of it."
—NextUp coordinator

SERVICE COORDINATION

NextUp programs provide direct services but also often refer youth to other programs on and off campus.

As mentioned, almost all programs identify and partner with relevant community-based agencies to meet students' holistic needs. NextUp students also described how staff referred them to other campus programs such as disability services or mental health services. In two-thirds of NextUp staff interviews, NextUp coordinators reported working directly with a campus representative for basic needs support such as a basic needs office, a CalFresh representative, and a housing representative. These NextUp staff said their relationships with basic need staff were important to quickly get students connected with support when they needed it, and 82 percent of survey respondents reported that they were able to promptly connect students with services.

On the survey, we asked about specific service coordination activities (appendix A table A.1). For most activities, original programs were more likely to report undertaking them than new programs. The exception was staff at newer programs were more likely to report tracking referrals and following up with both the student and campus department to ensure follow through than staff at older programs. Table A.1 shows the number of programs that offer each type of service coordination.

“They helped me get connected to [Disabled Student Programs and Services] so I could get accommodations in classes. They helped me get connected with a food bank [and] tutoring support outside of [my college] because I actually live an hour away. They’re actually able to figure out what’s available in [my neighborhood] and the resources there.”

—student in NextUp

Student Engagement

With NextUp students, we discussed how they learned about the program, the communication strategies used to inform them of services and events, and whether programs could more effectively engage students. Coordinators also explained their outreach and engagement processes and the events that they hold for students. Programs varied widely in the number of students served. Survey results showed that the number of students served in a semester ranges considerably for programs, from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 218. The overall median number of students served in fall 2023 was 39.

Urbanicity of the campus largely explained the variation in number of students served, with more rural campuses serving fewer students.

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

NextUp programs employ various outreach strategies, but students emphasized the importance of early outreach to get the full benefits of the program. Students and coordinators felt that community events like field trips and having a dedicated space were effective engagement strategies. Remote students in particular felt that more could be done to engage them.

On the survey, we asked which outreach and engagement activities the programs implemented during the current academic year. Over 75 percent of programs implemented the following outreach and engagement activities:

- Offer a streamlined application and onboarding process (e.g., students are not required to do separate applications for NextUp and EOPS and there are no deadlines for applying for NextUp) (88 percent)
- Partner with financial aid office to outreach to students who receive foster youth grant(s) (e.g., Chafee), or who self-identify on the FAFSA/CADAA (88 percent)
- Partner with institutional research and/or admissions and records offices to identify and outreach to students who have self-identified as having foster care experience on CCC Apply (80 percent)
- Maintain the contact information of key K-12 partners (e.g., school district foster youth liaisons, Foster Youth Success Initiatives) and collaborate to facilitate students' transition to postsecondary education (78 percent)

Among the NextUp programs that responded to the survey, 57 percent provide training to staff and faculty about the needs of students with experience in foster care and best practices to refer students to NextUp. About half (52 percent) host college tours or outreach events specifically for foster youth, in collaboration with local high school districts or other stakeholders. Coordinators we interviewed stressed the importance of maintaining strong connections with other departments and partners on campus for bringing students into the program and for facilitating service coordination. Most engagement activities indicated on the survey did not significantly vary in prevalence between original and new programs with the exception of hosting foster youth-specific college tours and/or outreach events, which was more common for original programs (64 percent) compared with new programs (45 percent).

The NextUp program website can serve as an avenue for attracting and informing potential NextUp participants, but many program websites lacked key features to support student enrollment. Over three quarters of programs that responded to the survey said they had a description of updated program eligibility criteria and contact information for staff on their NextUp website. Other website features were less common. About half reported having NextUp enrollment steps or a description of all programs supporting students with experience in foster care on their website. Less than a quarter reported having a directory of local resources specific to foster youth or integrating student voices and experiences into the program on their website. Eight programs reported none of these features on their NextUp website.

COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS

We learned from students that modes of communication, frequency of engagement, and types of engagement varied greatly between programs.

About three-quarters of students in our focus groups reported they were happy with NextUp's communication strategies and level of engagement. They described being able to reliably talk with their counselor, academic advisor, or coordinator via email, text, or app. Their programs often sent out information about services, workshops, community-building events, and resources that sounded interesting, important, and relevant to their lives and did so over multiple communication channels.

In contrast, about a quarter of students reported negative experiences with NextUp program communication. These students had a variety of negative communication issues: a couple of students said they reached out to program staff but didn't get responses; others didn't find out about events early enough or didn't come into contact with their program much.

"[I think there should be] better communication. Send emails. Sometimes they would have events but there would be a random email saying 'Thanks to everyone who came to this event!' and I didn't even know that there was an event. Tell people about events, tell people what services [you] really do provide, because I wasn't really sure. Reply to emails. I know it's not going to be instant but just show that [you're] there for the students."

—student in NextUp

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT EXPERIENCES

Students come to NextUp through a variety of channels. Identifying eligible students can be a challenge for NextUp programs with 40 percent of NextUp programs do not feel that they have the data necessary to identify students eligible for NextUp services.

Students learned about NextUp in a multitude of ways, which often affected when they joined the program and were able to access its resources and services. On the survey, campuses indicated that students were most likely to come to the attention of the NextUp program based on foster youth identifiers within the FAFSA/CADAA or other financial aid application, or by referral from another program or department on campus. For some, the NextUp program at their school reached out to them via email because they had indicated a history of involvement in the foster system on CCCApply, FAFSA, or another financial aid or registration form. This path to participation was often smooth, with students joining NextUp as soon as they started college and immediately having access to additional grants, program services, and resources that helped them come to class and focus on school. But only 60 percent of survey respondents said they had the data necessary to identify students eligible for NextUp services. Less than a quarter of students were directly connected to their campus's NextUp program via their high school counselor or caseworker, which could make their transition to college more seamless.

"I'm glad that my social worker took the time to introduce me and took me out there [to campus], so I could meet the staff and the people I could go to for help. I think that every social worker should do that, even if they're not planning on going to school. Just plant that seed that if you ever decide to go to school you have that support system."

—student in NextUp

Many students were referred to NextUp after they had started school, with the referral coming from a different program or campus department such as Guardian Scholars, EOPS, general academic counseling, or the office of financial aid. These students were grateful to be referred to the program, though many wished they had known about it sooner. Sometimes they had been at college for multiple semesters before they started participating in NextUp. A few students learned about the program from a friend or family member who recommended NextUp to them. Hearing about another person's positive experience with the program made students interested in engaging.

Students recommended that the program reach out to potential participants earlier to ensure that they can access NextUp resources, grants, and services as soon as they start college. Some suggested high school outreach and more collaboration with child welfare case managers; others proposed having flyers with QR codes around campus or other advertising around campus for students to find out about the program.

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH EVENTS

Events present opportunities for NextUp staff to engage with students and for students to engage with each other.

Students described hearing about and attending events to meet friends, learn about important topics, and have new experiences. Coordinators also discussed how holding events such as field trips, workshops, and game nights can give students the opportunity build community, gain life skills, and connect with program staff.

Both students and coordinators explained that students hear about upcoming events from flyers, emails, in group chats, on communication apps, and even on their school's learning platforms where they submit homework. Most students think the communication surrounding events is accessible and timely, but some wished they knew about events sooner since it is difficult to travel to campus.

Students highlighted field trips as exciting, informative, and conducive to making friendships. Some programs planned trips to four-year colleges and universities to help students in their transfer process and took students to museums or amusement parks.

"I've definitely made a lot [of] friends from the NextUp program, not really from the workshops... The workshops tend to not be very popular. The one thing I've found that [are popular] are the field trips. I think that's pretty much where I've made almost all my friends there... [The field trip] gives you the opportunity to do the actual thing you're doing on the field trip like take advantage of touring the campus, and allows you to meet the other foster youth."

—student in NextUp

Coordinators discussed delivering educational programming like workshops on financial literacy and mental health. Although students weren't as excited to attend these events as others, they did appreciate when food was provided during events.

Both students and coordinators described additional events like game nights that bring staff and program participants together. Students enjoyed connecting with each other, and coordinators appreciated the opportunity to talk to individuals who may have been missing meetings or not responding to texts.

CONNECTING VIRTUALLY

One of the biggest challenges in engagement was communicating and building relationships with students who take classes online or cannot travel to campus.

Generally, we heard in our discussions with students that those who visited campus for class regularly felt more engaged in NextUp. In contrast, the students who attended classes virtually who we spoke with often didn't go to in-person events because of transportation limitations or a lack of motivation. These students wished that staff would be more proactive about supporting them, communicating with them, and including them in activities.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH A NEXTUP CENTER

NextUp coordinators emphasized the benefits of having a dedicated physical space on campus that can provide students with hot food, laptop/computer access, and other resources.

In addition to fulfilling student needs, these centers can give students the opportunity to spend time with program staff and other students outside of events. Students also expressed their appreciation for the NextUp centers and the "extras" provided there (e.g., snacks, coffee, office supplies). When asked about how the NextUp program could be improved, many coordinators and students suggested either adding or expanding a NextUp center.

Student Experiences

In the focus groups, students shared their perspectives on the NextUp program including their experiences with services, supports, and staff.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH NEXTUP

The vast majority of students—about 80 percent—spoke positively of the NextUp services they received and highlighted the importance of supportive staff.

In general, the students we spoke with had positive experiences with NextUp staff and services. Financial supports such as the NextUp grant, book vouchers, gas cards, and food cards were often mentioned as especially helpful for students in their day-to-day lives. Many of these students said that the financial support had a large, positive effect on their lives and made going to school possible. Although less frequently mentioned by students, NextUp's other services like academic supports and assistance with other campus programs had a large impact on the community college experience for some NextUp participants.

In general, students also spoke very highly of the staff at their NextUp programs. The majority of students felt that NextUp staff were thoughtful and supportive of them. These students spoke about the ways in which their NextUp counselor would listen and work to make sure that their needs were met, either with a NextUp support or by connecting the student to another service or program such as CalFresh, the financial aid office, or the college's office of disability services.

"[NextUp staff] are always there and have been there my whole college years. I'm about to graduate, and I'm sad I have to leave them. They're like my second family. People who were in foster care don't really have a lot of guidance about college. Thankfully we have somebody at the campus that we can connect to, and they're willing to help us."

—student in NextUp

About 7 percent of students we spoke with had more negative experiences with the NextUp program. The most common reason for such experiences was lackluster communication by NextUp staff. A few NextUp students felt that they were not actively assisted by NextUp staff. Students attributed this to the challenges in communicating with the staff. This sentiment was more common for students who took classes online. A few students also felt that NextUp could do more to communicate with other departments on campus to advocate for participants. For example, one student described how their health issue caused tension with a professor; they wished that their NextUp counselor had directly spoken with the professor to help them understand the circumstances.

Several students also felt more negatively about the program because they had continued unmet financial needs. Many students described their past or present financial hardships while attending community college, and most received financial supports from NextUp that they felt reduced their financial hardship. However, a minority of students felt that their financial hardships were still significant; they mentioned additional supports that they wished NextUp had provided them but were not provided at the time.

STUDENT-LED PROGRAM

NextUp is described by students as a student-led program with students able to share their feedback and input in a variety of ways from formal surveys to informal discussions with staff.

Staff and students generally agreed that NextUp programs were student-led, citing how the program addresses students' unique needs and responds to feedback. Most students felt that the NextUp staff they interacted with actively listened to their needs and worked to support them as much as they could. NextUp staff similarly said that they tried as much as they could to connect students to as many resources as possible. Staff described examples like organizing field trips or funding a study abroad program where they felt that the NextUp program had gone above and beyond to give participants positive experiences.

Students described various ways that NextUp programs received their feedback. In most cases, students gave feedback through their regular meetings with NextUp counselors. In a few programs, students described how NextUp would distribute feedback surveys in order to more systematically receive feedback from students.

Students described numerous ideas for how their programs could improve and generally felt that their NextUp staff would be receptive to such ideas. Only a few students felt that their NextUp staff were not attentive enough to their needs or concerns.

VIRTUAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Although virtual students still generally spoke positively about the NextUp program, they felt that the virtual experience of NextUp could be improved.

Students who participated in the program remotely still received substantial financial assistance, but they generally spoke less positively about engagement and the general experience of NextUp. Multiple students who mostly engaged virtually felt that it was sometimes hard for them to learn about, and stay on top of, the various events and opportunities that NextUp sent them. Additionally, although

they still generally spoke positively about their relationships with counselors, they also felt that it was harder to form relationships with counselors virtually. One student with a particularly poor experience said that their counselor did not show up to their scheduled Zoom meeting. Students who participated remotely also described how they felt a bit left out of the community of NextUp, since they did not attend in-person events or go to in-person NextUp spaces (when a campus had one available). In these cases, these students suggested that their campus should have more virtual engagement sessions or events to help keep them in the loop and facilitate the virtual NextUp community. Students who participated virtually and in person both spoke highly of various group chats and social media apps that some programs used to keep in touch with students; other programs could consider similar measures.

“When I go [to campus] and I see kids talking and stuff like that, I assume they’re going to school in person. But for me [as a remote student], I don’t really have any college friends.”
—student in NextUp

NextUp Implementation

NextUp staff consistently raised the importance of two major themes that impact NextUp implementation: NextUp program guidelines and the campus context. These themes arose in all conversations we had with NextUp coordinators. For some programs, the NextUp guidelines and their campus environment facilitated the construction of an effective NextUp program. However, some staff felt that these factors caused severe challenges in implementing NextUp.

NEXTUP PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Positive or negative opinions about the program guidelines and funding guidance were a common theme in coordinator interviews.

Some coordinators felt that the flexibility in guidelines allows the program to be creative with the best ways to support students and expand services in the context of their other support programs. Other coordinators viewed the guidelines as vague, not flexible. They said this vagueness inhibits their ability to confidently and efficiently use the funding to serve students.

“The amount of flexibility has really helped us be the experts in what is best service and how to support our students. These emergency grants can be lifesaving. We set the rules as to who and how much and what can be supported. That has been really helpful to the success of implementing our program. ... [On the other hand,] there was little to no guidance at the beginning, and I’m used to managing different grants and abiding by rule. I really was expecting some kind of guidance, but at the beginning there wasn’t any. We didn’t know what we could do or couldn’t do or if we would run into problems. The lack of guidance at the beginning was a huge, huge challenge.”

—NextUp coordinator

CAMPUS CONTEXT

The campus environment—especially the campus leadership, organizational structure, and individual staff leaders—played a major role in NextUp implementation across all programs, shaping the NextUp program and sometimes supporting it or hindering it.

On campuses, NextUp is usually implemented within a student services division either alongside or under EOPS. Sometimes NextUp is grouped with other programs that support students with foster care experience, most often Guardian Scholars. Most coordinators spoke of NextUp as a program that adds to and surpasses what those other programs provide.

“EOPS/NextUp students receive everything that a typical [student at our college] receives. Access to everything. Then EOPS goes ‘over and above.’ CARE and NextUp go ‘above and beyond’ and ‘in addition to.’”

—NextUp coordinator

NextUp staff often spoke of how the structure and leadership of existing programs affected NextUp. Some programs spoke of the relationship positively: more than half of NextUp programs felt

that campuses effectively slotted NextUp into the array of support programs to maximize support for participants.

However, other NextUp programs felt that such relationships had made NextUp implementation more difficult. Several NextUp program coordinators spoke of the tension between NextUp's nonpunitive philosophy and EOPS's more stringent participation requirements. Although EOPS can provide benefits that are similar to (though less generous than) the NextUp program, NextUp coordinators said that their campuses' EOPS programs required students to attend at least one meeting per semester—and up to three—to receive EOPS benefits. Three coordinators described how EOPS leadership pushed back against NextUp during initial implementation because EOPS leaders disagreed with NextUp not requiring any specific participant engagement. Several students also raised their own confusion about NextUp's participation requirements compared with the requirements of EOPS; these students believed that NextUp had multiple required meetings per semester, just as EOPS did. A third of coordinators also spoke of tension between NextUp and Guardian Scholars because both programs operate similarly, but NextUp provides much more financial support per participant. Multiple coordinators said that Guardian Scholars has similar requirements and services as NextUp, though the financial supports are less generous. Two coordinators said they felt conflicted providing such different levels of support to such similar populations. Many students interviewed also expressed confusion about the two programs, saying that they did not understand the difference between them or which services came from which program.

NextUp coordinators spoke of the major role deans or individual department leaders often took. Coordinators said that supportive campus leadership was key to a successful NextUp implementation. Campus leadership had final say on approving spending, such as hiring new staff or providing direct support to students, and on program organizational structure.

“My most valuable asset was [an] administration that let me do what I do and didn't get in the way. I had budget meetings with the dean, but [they weren't] dictating. [They] had the right to say no, but [they] weren't dictating what I do.”

—NextUp coordinator

Some staff described their department leaders enthusiastically approving creative uses of NextUp funding to support students; however, staff at a few programs experienced more stringent department (or campus) leadership that would not approve appropriate staffing levels for the NextUp program despite an excess of program funding. On the survey, 69 percent of respondents said that they feel supported by their campus administration most of the time or always.

STAFFING

There is large variation in staffing across programs—some have the necessary staffing level to support students, some do not.

When speaking to NextUp staff, we heard of a range of staffing support:

- In the best case, a large campus—serving almost 150 students—had five dedicated NextUp staff, four student workers, and many other staff working on EOPS/Guardian Scholars that also assisted NextUp students.
- In the worst case, a smaller campus—serving about 40 students—had only one part-time dedicated NextUp staff member, and only a few dedicated NextUp-EOPS-Guardian Scholars staff.
- Programs were usually between these two extremes, but the majority of survey respondents did not feel that their staffing was adequately resourced. Less than half (45 percent) said that they had been able to hire all the staff they needed for the program always or most of the time and 38 percent said they felt overburdened. Still about half of survey respondents felt that NextUp staff are given adequate support and training to best serve youth.
- Programs use the available staff slots differently, but the most common roles are NextUp coordinators and counselors. Two of the NextUp programs we interviewed mentioned other roles—one had a success coach and the other a success specialist. NextUp staff often spend part of their time working at other programs (e.g., EOPS and Guardian Scholars).

Some staff members mentioned that their programs had not yet approved additional hiring for NextUp staff, even though they had the funding available for it. One smaller campus said that they want to hire another staff member, but the director of the department has been hesitant to approve it, despite available funding. A larger campus has wanted to hire a dedicated NextUp coordinator for a while, but their school continually denies them, despite available funding.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Over two thirds of programs who responded to the survey felt that their program had received adequate technical assistance and training to support implementing NextUp either most of the time or always.

Although staff at NextUp programs did not have extensive input on their technical assistance uses and needs, a few staff members proposed supports that may help their campus and others. The most common proposed technical assistance was any additional support that programs could receive to help understand NextUp funding and eligibility guidelines. Several staff members continually raised their need for additional support to interpret the NextUp rules, such as additional guidance from the state or guidance from individuals or other NextUp programs. However, one staff member expressed that although guidance from the state could be helpful, they were wary of additional guidance or clarifying language restricting their use of NextUp funding.

“Now we’re in an interesting situation because we’ve got three different phases of NextUp program out there. I don’t need to hear a lot of what happens now in NextUp trainings. [laughs] I really don’t. We’re so far beyond that. At the last technical training for NextUp, last year, they gave out what they felt were best practices, and I thought that was pretty good because then programs had something by which to gauge their program, rather than ‘We hope this is right’ or ‘We hope this is effective.’”

—NextUp coordinator

Several staff members said that it would be helpful for them to be in closer communication with other NextUp programs to share information and tips across the programs. Additionally, two staff members raised the importance of talking with other staff members to help cope with the emotional challenges and share personal tips on how to best manage the stresses of the job. To this end, one staff member had previously mentioned how NextUp held occasional events where staff have met up in the past year or two; they felt that these events were very helpful to learn about others’ experiences.

“[People] who serve former foster youth could benefit greatly from a mental health day where we have workshops about emotional intelligence, time management, capacity management. A day where we check in because at the end of the day, we take a lot in from this particular population. We navigate but we’re human.”

—NextUp coordinator

A minority of staff said that it would be helpful to get more specific technical assistance on data collection, tracking, and analysis. The staff member that spoke most about their own data tracking said that although they have access to a wide range of data on NextUp participants, they do not have the expertise to properly evaluate trends in service usage or educational outcomes. Other staff said that they did not have access to much formal data on NextUp participants, and they wanted to learn how to access and manage such data.

IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESSES

The primary component of implementation success described by staff was learning how to harness NextUp’s flexibility to maximize the program’s generous funding to best serve students’ diverse needs.

NextUp programs were often able to provide extremely generous direct grants to their participants while still having leftover funding to provide services such as emergency assistance and field trips. However, nearly all staff described a learning period as their NextUp programs were being implemented, during which they needed to discover from experience what services or supports NextUp funding could be used for. For the programs that spoke most positively of their program’s implementation, they said that they had learned that they could get creative with NextUp funding to best support students.

Another major success—for some programs—was their experience of successfully integrating NextUp into the existing program array, especially EOPS and Guardian Scholars. On the survey, most NextUp programs (73 percent) were implemented on a campus that had another program that served students with foster care history prior to NextUp. But this rate was higher for new programs (77 percent) than for original programs (67 percent).

“Before I came on board there were two separate programs [NextUp and Guardian Scholars], two separate coordinators, different deans, different staff members. From what I hear, it wasn’t very collaborative. It was a lot of have and have nots—the Guardian Scholars students were wondering why the NextUp students get so much. When I got hired a few months in, [the administration] reorganized to have all the programs under one person, one dean.”

—NextUp coordinator

Since new NextUp participants were often already participating in EOPS and/or Guardian Scholars (or another program for students with foster care experience), staff had to consider best practices to optimize overlapping support systems. For campuses that had another program before NextUp, half reported on the survey that they fully integrated that program with NextUp, 20 percent continue to operate the other program separately from NextUp, 18 percent ceased the other program’s operation, 7 percent were unsure regarding the status of the prior program, and 4 percent said the other program was scheduled to cease operations. Original programs were more likely to be on a campus that had another program serving students with foster care history that operated separately (28 percent for original programs compared with 17 percent for new programs).

For several programs, staff said that they experienced great success by essentially making the NextUp program distinction invisible to students. Students with foster care experience would interact with the campus support more broadly, and the staff would do the backend work to manage the funding and provide students with as much support as possible. The goal with this approach was to reduce any confusion students might experience being served by multiple similar programs.

“On the staffing end, we know that things come from different financial sources and we have different measurements, etc. but students don’t really know the difference. The way we structure it is that every student who was in foster care is a Guardian Scholars student. Students who qualify for NextUp also get additional NextUp services. We’re really particular about how we market things and the students all identify as a part of the Guardian Scholar community and that’s worked out really well for us.”

—NextUp coordinator

A few programs also reported that NextUp helped alleviate strain on their other social service programs; by primarily supporting NextUp students through generous NextUp funding, they could give those students expanded services while also freeing up funding for students only involved in EOPS or Guardian Scholars. However, some staff felt that NextUp students “took seats away” from their EOPS program.

Two-thirds of staff also spoke about the importance of their relationships with other campus programs to effectively implement the NextUp program. The most common connection with other departments was financial aid. Two-thirds of the NextUp staff we interviewed reported active relationships with staff in the financial aid department. These relationships helped staff reach as many NextUp students as possible and get them as much funding as possible. In one-third of interviews, NextUp staff mentioned automatically receiving the information for students who might be NextUp-eligible based on their responses on the FAFSA or CCCApply system. Among those specifically asked, the vast majority of NextUp students said that they knew who to talk with regarding financial aid questions. About a third of the students also said that NextUp staff had directly helped them speak with the financial aid department or apply for grants like Chafee.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

One of the most common implementation challenges reported during our interviews was how vague NextUp guidelines are regarding how funding may be used.

Staff at multiple programs described how they still had NextUp funding from multiple prior semesters, and they could not seem to find ways to spend it all without going over the students’ unmet need limit. Even for staff at programs that reported the most creative uses of NextUp funding, they said

that it took them time to figure out how they are allowed to use the funding. But it seemed that staff generally had to figure out these opportunities on their own using trial and error. At best, it took some time to figure out all the ways to use NextUp money; at worst, some staff felt that they had no other ideas about how to spend down the money.

“I think people want to be sure they are following the rules and are not creating audit findings. I don’t think people care about rules. Sometimes I think when things are too loose, you create the possibility of things not going right because people think they can do whatever and then you find out when you’re in trouble. I don’t think that’s necessarily good for campuses. I know they’re trying to make it easier. Sometimes I think, just give us some clear guidelines and let us go. And then communicate that.”

—NextUp coordinator

The confusion regarding NextUp rules was compounded by the difficulties that some staff reported in implementing NextUp in the context of other support programs. Staff often described how at least one or two staff members at their campus felt uncomfortable with NextUp’s ideology of having essentially no program requirements for active (eligible) students, compared with their EOPS program, which at least required that students meet with a counselor a few times a semester or risk being dismissed from the program. One NextUp coordinator shared these concerns and felt that NextUp was not pushing students to succeed. A few staff members also described how the differences between NextUp and Guardian Scholars (or other support programs for students with foster care experience) could cause tensions: the programs served very similar populations, but NextUp students received much more support than those only in Guardian Scholars. Although NextUp students did not generally share such concerns, many were not certain about the eligibility or service differences between NextUp and Guardian Scholars.

Programs have adapted to this tension in differing ways. One campus proactively reorganized their student services staff as a first step in NextUp implementation to try to seamlessly serve students without any interprogram tension. Another campus is working toward making it clearer to students about what services they can expect from each program.

For several programs, staff members' discussion of program implementation centered on the limitations they experienced in financially supporting students, especially regarding their basic needs. Two staff members continually returned to the feeling that their students faced massive challenges—such as food insecurity or homelessness—that they did not feel like they had the resources to fully address. Although students did not generally discuss dire basic need circumstances on their own, it became clear during focus groups how participants' different programs provided different levels of direct support. For example, one student reported that NextUp paid for all their books via a book voucher, while another student did not receive any help with buying their books. The reason for the differences between programs' financial support and self-reported financial circumstances was not readily apparent.

Student Success

NextUp program's definition of success focused on short-term goals (such as retention or completing a class) rather than long-term goals (such as graduation) and emphasized that goals were student specific.

None of the NextUp programs emphasized graduation as the primary measure of success, but several noted transfer to a four-year school as a sign of student success. This could be because graduation rates among students with foster care experience are low: of those who enroll at public two-year colleges in California by age 21, only about 6 percent graduate by age 24 (Hanson et al. 2022). Even among the general population of students enrolled in community colleges in California, only about 30 percent of students graduate within six years.⁸

“I look at success a few different ways. I look at the number of students in the program. I look at retention, I look at persistence, and I look at graduation rates. Graduation rates I don't deem as important as retention, quite frankly.”

—NextUp coordinator

Many of the programs emphasized retention as the best measure of student success, focusing on the steps to longer term goals. Five of the nine programs we spoke with named persistence and retention as one of the primary measures of success. Two of the nine programs specifically stated that

“success isn’t about graduation—it’s about retention.” Programs emphasized that the road to graduation is long and difficult for these students, so they emphasized focusing on the short-term goal of retention.

“It’s a constant exercise of removing barriers just to keep students on the path. And they can be on the path for a long time. A long time. It’s not two years and you’ll complete your community college education. I’ve had very few of those since [I started]. As a matter of fact I have a student graduating this year who’s been in school since 2017. So our process looks different.”

—NextUp coordinator

NextUp program staff emphasized that success may look very different for different students. Some programs mentioned more traditional long-term goals such as graduation, earning a certificate, or transferring to a university. Transferring to a university or four-year school was the most mentioned long-term goal by most of NextUp coordinators. Many programs emphasized less traditional goals like finding a career path or getting a driver’s license. One program described how a student was struggling academically, but together with NextUp determined that they really wanted to become a firefighter. They were able to identify the steps to get into fire academy, such as taking a CPR class. For that student, success was figuring out what they wanted to do with their life.

“It’s a little bit conflicting because our college keeps talking about certain metrics like completing in five years, but for me it’s more about seeing their growth. A student that shows up because a social worker made them go to college, [but is] not doing well, and then a light bulb turning on, and they actually become really dedicated and want to be here. That is what I see to be student success.... Sure, good GPAs and completing a degree by a certain time, all those things that are considered student success, but for NextUp it’s beyond that. [For students] to not give up on themselves.”

—NextUp coordinator

DATA

All NextUp staff mentioned tracking student data in some form, however a few staff wished they had access to more data.

All but one of the NextUp programs mentioned actively tracking students' academic outcomes data, such as persistence, retention, transfers, and graduation. The program that did not actively track outcomes said that their campus had just approved them to start receiving such data. NextUp staff use these data primarily as a measure of how students are progressing in the program, rather than a measure of program success. As mentioned above, almost all program coordinators described student success as very individual. Two-thirds of programs interviewed managed a student engagement database for them to track participants' NextUp engagement. One program said that they share the data with students to help them manage their goals and identify barriers they may be facing. Another program mentioned using financial aid data to creatively give more funding to students within campus rules.

Data were collected in a variety of ways. Some programs used excel spreadsheets or ConexEd to track data, while others were provided dashboards by their college. Some programs collect and track needs assessment responses, as well as time in the program and contacts. But only 43 percent of survey respondents said they have the data needed to understand if they are effectively serving students.

“We can generate [data]. Some of it I get from our data system, some of it I can get from our regular databases. We keep our own separate database in our program, and I can get microdata from that. I know who has persisted. We track a student from beginning to end. If a student doesn't come back, we know why they didn't come back.”

—NextUp coordinator

Recommendations

Despite its successes, the NextUp program has areas in which it could improve, especially given the variability across campuses in services, student experiences, and implementation. We have listed some program recommendations below:

- **Provide more guidance on how to use NextUp funding without restricting the program’s flexibility.** A contradiction we heard was that the flexibility inherent in the program guidelines was both one of its strongest assets and most difficult challenges. Coordinators expressed gratitude for the freedom to use funds to target students’ unique challenges. But some coordinators also communicated frustration with what they felt to be obtuse program guidelines. They felt unsure of how, where, and when it was appropriate to spend NextUp funding, which hampered their ability to support students. We recommend finding a way to improve communication about the NextUp program and funding guidelines while also maintaining the program’s valuable flexibility.
- **Create resources to help NextUp staff navigate the challenges of integrating NextUp with existing programs.** Although guidance exists on how to integrate NextUp with other student support programs,⁹ some NextUp staff still struggled with reconciling the differences between programs. This issue most commonly arose in two areas. One, some coordinators disagreed with the lack of participation requirements in the NextUp program, compared with EOPS. Two, some found it difficult to communicate the different funding levels of Guardian Scholars and NextUp to students. We advise tackling each of these challenges separately by creating targeted resources to address each.
- **Reconsider recommended staffing structure to ensure NextUp programs have sufficient staff.** In interviews, we heard from both well-staffed and understaffed programs, but the survey indicates that most programs feel a staffing crunch. In interviews, we most often heard staffing stress from staff members who were part-time or the sole NextUp staff member for their program. Similar to how funding is tiered based on the number of students served, we think programs could benefit from guidance on a minimum staff to student ratio. We recommend communicating this as a best practice to programs and campus administrations, and assisting NextUp programs that work with their campus leadership to get more staffing approved.
- **Encourage more resources for engagement with and community building among students.** Students expressed gratitude for the community provided by NextUp and a desire for more community. They valued connecting with students who had a similar history and who were dealing with similar challenges. Students voiced the wish to make more friends through the program and feel more connected to their community, both on and off campus. One student recommended NextUp facilitating volunteering within the community, and some students said that field trips were a great way to connect with other NextUp students. NextUp programs are

already doing this work, but we recommend NextUp continue look for ways to foster community building among students within the program.

- **Develop new ways to engage with virtual students.** Virtual students explained how they often felt less engaged with the NextUp program compared with their peers on campus. We recommend exploring ways to engage with these students, exploring options beyond what typically works for students on campus.
- **Ensure that each NextUp program has a physical program space.** Students and NextUp staff alike stressed the importance of a physical space for the program. A physical space encourages student engagement, serves a resource hub for students, and supports the type of community building mentioned above. Staff discussed how seeing students made it easier to learn about their lives and needs. Students expressed the value of having a place to connect with staff, talk to other students, and study. One recommendation is to ensure that all NextUp programs have a physical community space where students can gather.
- **Analyze long term outcomes.** We heard that NextUp coordinators focus on short-term outcomes (e.g., completing the semester), emphasizing that the road to graduation can be long for students with foster care history and that it is important to celebrate small wins to keep students moving forward. Although focusing on short-term outcomes can help students progress and persist in community college, NextUp's program should not lose sight of long-term goals such as receiving credentials (either a certificate, associates' degree, or bachelors' degree) at the community college or via a transfer to a four-year institution. Although obtaining at least some college credits can benefit lifetime earnings, the biggest benefits come from earning a degree (Carnevale et al. 2011, National Center for Education Statistics 2024).¹⁰ We recommend that NextUp programs regularly track and analyze degree- and certificate-completion outcomes to understand the impact of the NextUp program on their students. If they lack capacity, technical assistance should be provided. This outcome tracking could be done not just at individual campuses, but across all NextUp campuses.

Conclusion

Students with foster care experience enroll in college facing a diverse set of barriers. We heard from the students we spoke with that they are encountering financial barriers, academic barriers, and social and emotional barriers. The literature shows that these challenges can inhibit students' ability to persist in and graduate from postsecondary education (Courtney et al. 2011; Courtney et al. 2020; Geiger and

Beltran 2017; Okpych and Courtney 2021). Students may also enter college with one or more protective factors, such as more time in extended foster care (for young people who have aged out of care), higher reading ability and high school grades, educational aspirations, and connections to resourceful adults (Courtney and Hook 2017; Okpych and Courtney 2017, 2019; Okpych, Courtney, and Dennis 2017). These protective factors and challenges vary from student to student depending on their circumstances.

In order to best serve students with foster care experience, a program needs to have the flexibility and resources to address each student's needs and capitalize on their protective factors. First, since every student arrives with different strengths and challenges, it is important to assess each student's individual needs. This requires building a strong and trusting relationship with students. Second, the program needs to have sufficient staff, funding, and resources to address each student's needs. Dedicated, knowledgeable staff are critical to a program's success, and those staff need sufficient time to engage and build relationships with students as well as provide services. Third, there needs to be enough funding to provide financial supports that alleviate the economic hardships of the students. Fourth, the program needs the freedom to be flexible in how they deploy resources to assist with a diverse range of regular and one-time student needs. Support from campus leadership can help facilitate this flexibility and infrastructure needed for a successful implementation.

NextUp has all the components necessary to serve students with foster care history. Both students and staff reported that the program is student led. Staff assess the needs of students, listen to what a student wants, and effectively engage with students in creative ways. The program provides a lot of funding, often in less conventional ways, such as through book vouchers, which pay for costs that are often overlooked. The program also has freedom and flexibility to address students' unique needs. Despite providing some negative feedback, the vast majority of students interviewed had very positive experiences with NextUp. Students valued the services and opportunities available to them, appreciated the supportive and thoughtful staff, and felt that the NextUp program provided them with the financial and social supports they needed to help them reach their educational goals.

Appendix A. NextUp Service Coordination

On the survey, we asked about specific service coordination activities. Below we present the share of programs that engage in each type of service coordination.

TABLE A.1

NextUp Service Coordination Activities by Campus Implementation Status

Service coordination activity	All programs (n=86)	New programs (n=53)	Original programs (n=33)
NextUp staff identify and partner with relevant community-based agencies to meet students' holistic needs, other than housing.	79%	77%	82%
Program staff track referrals and follow up with both the student and campus department to ensure follow through.	67%	72%	61%
Campus support programs work collaboratively to minimize duplication of requirements (e.g., multiple applications) to increase access to programs.	66%	64%	70%
Most key departments have an identified point of contact to whom foster youth can be referred.	62%	60%	64%
NextUp staff have relationships with local homeless service providers to refer students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.	60%	58%	64%
NextUp staff advocate to change institutional policies and practices that negatively impact youth with experience in care.	59%	53%	70%
Students enrolled in multiple programs can identify a "lead" program to satisfy counseling session requirements and lift the burden of multiple program requirements.	57%	53%	64%
NextUp applies a coordinated approach to inform the development of a student's comprehensive education plan (e.g., NextUp and Disabled Student Programs and Services meet jointly).	50%	42%	64%
NextUp coordinates cross-training opportunities with campus and community partners.	44%	32%	64%
NextUp coordinates with local banking institutions or other community partners to facilitate financial literacy programming.	37%	32%	45%
Processes are set up with essential campus partners to expedite emergency services within one to two business days.	33%	30%	36%
Sustainable and streamlined processes are formally established (e.g., memorandum of understandings with community partners to improve access to services).	33%	26%	42%
A NextUp advisory committee meets at least quarterly to discuss service coordination.	29%	28%	30%

Service coordination activity	All programs (n=86)	New programs (n=53)	Original programs (n=33)
NextUp meets monthly with campus support programs to discuss service coordination and engages in case conferencing weekly or as needed.	22%	25%	18%
NextUp staff identify and partner with relevant community-based agencies to meet students' holistic needs, other than housing.	79%	77%	82%
Program staff track referrals and follow up with both the student and campus department to ensure follow through.	67%	72%	61%
Campus support programs work collaboratively to minimize duplication of requirements (e.g., multiple applications) to increase access to programs.	66%	64%	70%
None of the above	1%	2%	0%

Source: Author's analysis of survey of NextUp programs.

Notes: Survey was distributed to all NextUp programs. Out of the 115 programs, 86 programs responded. New NextUp programs began receiving funding in January 2023 or later. Original NextUp programs began receiving funding before January 2023.

Notes

- ¹ The only community college in California without a NextUp program is CalBright; that campus is 100 percent online.
- ² In 2014, California Senate Bill 1023 passed, which created the Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support Program (subsequently renamed NextUp) at California community colleges. NextUp was funded by an initial budget allocation of \$15 million, which was increased to \$20 million in 2017, bringing the total number of participating campuses to 45. The number of participating campuses became 46 when Madera College was added as a new institution to the system. The 2022–23 California budget expanded the State’s investment in the program to \$50 million, allowing all 115 community colleges in the state to receive an allocation of funds. This funding was disbursed in January 2023.
- ³ Data show that 18,706 students with foster care history were enrolled in community college in fall 2023; see: California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, “Management Information Systems Data Mart,” accessed April 18, 2024, https://datamart.cccco.edu/Services/Special_Pop_Count.aspx.
- ⁴ The Guardian Scholars Program is a campus support program in California for current and former foster youth. This campus support program seeks to offer students the resources needed to successfully navigate college and graduate. To be eligible for Guardian Scholars, students must identify as a current or former foster youth, provide a proof of dependency letter, be a California resident, and be enrolled full-time.
- ⁵ “Extended Opportunity Programs and Services,” California Community Colleges, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/Student-Service/What-we-do/Extended-Opportunity-Programs-and-Services>; “California Guardian Scholar Program,” FosterClub, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.fosterclub.com/resources/california-guardian-scholar-program>.
- ⁶ Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) is a campus support program in California targeted to students disadvantaged by social, economic, educational or linguistic barriers. EOPS aims to get these students the resources they need to enroll and succeed at any California community college. EOPS offers comprehensive academic and support counseling, financial aid and other services. NextUp is an EOPS program, but is targeted only students with foster care history.
- ⁷ The response rate for new programs was 77 percent; the response rate for original programs was 72 percent.
- ⁸ Sara Wiessman, “Lagging behind,” Inside Higher Ed. November 21, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/11/22/california-community-colleges-suffer-low-completion-rates>.
- ⁹ John Burton Advocates for Youth, “NextUp Implementation Tools,” last updated June 21, 2024, <https://jbay.org/resources/nextup-implementation/>.
- ¹⁰ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024 “Education Pays, 2023,” Career Outlook, <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2024/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>.

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