TAY-Hub
Transition-Age Youth Research & Evaluation Hub

FIRST-YEAR AND FOUR-YEAR COMMUNITY COLLEGE OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH WITH EXPERIENCE IN CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE

PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL SERIES



JUNE 2026

NATHANAEL J. OKPYC, PhD
ANTHONY GÓMEZ, PhD
ASTHA AGARWAL, MA

Significance

About 4 in 5 students with experience in foster care (SEFC) in California who enter postsecondary education start in community college. Affordable tuition, remedial coursework, and flexible programs at community colleges make them an essential gateway to higher education for SEFC.

While many SEFC only pursue postsecondary education at the community college level, most research on SEFC experiences and outcomes focuses on those attending four-year institutions. To address this gap, this study linked administrative data from California's child welfare and community college systems to explore population-level characteristics and outcomes. This study followed SEFC outcomes for nearly 10 years, revealing changes linked to shifts in programs and policies. Study findings have implications for identifying SEFC and promoting their success in community college.

Study Methods

This study used statewide population-level child welfare data linked with student records from the California Community College Chancellor's Office. The sample featured young people who were: (a) in California foster care at age 13 or older between January 2004 and September 2016, (b) at least 21 years old by September 2024, and (c) attended a community college in California. The analysis focused on demographics, foster care characteristics (e.g., referrals, placement types), academic outcomes (e.g., enrollment, GPA, course withdrawal), and other indicators like financial aid and participation in campus-based support programs.

THIS STUDY EXPLORED THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What percentage of youth with experience in foster care enroll in community college, persist through their first year, and complete a certificate or degree within 4 years?
- What percentage of SEFC are identified in community college administrative data as having been in foster care?
- How does the 4-year credential completion rate for SEFC compare to that of the general student population attending California community colleges?
- What are the first-year and four-year academic outcomes (i.e., course enrollment and completion, GPA, retention, and persistence) of SEFC?
- What percentage of SEFC received financial aid and participated in campus support programs while enrolled in community college?

Findings

1 Many SEFC Enroll in Community College but Far Fewer Earn a Credential

Of the 137,717 young people in this sample, 39.6% enrolled in community college, of whom 39.9% persisted in their first year of college. Only 4.7% of those who enrolled went on to complete a credential within 4 years: 3.9% earned an associate's degree and 0.8% earned a vocational certificate.

2 Academic Outcomes Indicate Struggles among SEFC

Among first-time college students, the average first-year GPA was low (1.46). Overall, 60% of SEFC earned a GPA below 2.0, which can result in academic probation and disqualify them from certain types of financial aid (e.g., federal and state grants).

Four-year credential completion rates have increased modestly for SEFC, from 4% in 2012 to 7% in 2018. These figures are substantially lower than those for all California community college students, which increased from 12% in 2012 to 19% in 2018. Among first-time college students, SEFC were 2.5 to 3 times less likely to earn a credential than the general student population.

3 Identification of Former Foster Youth by Community Colleges is Improving

The percentage of SEFC enrolled in California community colleges who were identified as current or former foster youth in the California community college Management Information System (MIS) increased from 43.2% in 2012 to 59.8% in 2022.

4 Many SEFC Receive Financial Aid; Fewer Access Campus-Based Support

More than four-fifths of SEFC received some form of financial aid during the first year of community college, and 87.3% received aid during their first 4 years. The most common types of financial aid were grants or scholarships that do not require repayment.

A substantial portion of SEFC participated in either EOPS or NextUp programs. Prior to NextUp implementation in 2016, 14% to 16% of SEFC received support from the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services initiative each year. By 2022, 20.8% of SEFC accessed services through NextUp, a support program designed for SEFC. Among those attending colleges with NextUp in 2022, 28.4% participated in the program.

Implications

Two-fifths of SEFC were not identified by the community college system's foster youth indicator in recent years. The CCCCO took an important step by adding a foster youth data element to their system, yet our results suggest that the MIS missed 40% of youth who had been in California foster care on or after their 13th birthday. Our findings highlight the need to improve efforts to identify and engage SEFC. Community colleges with high identification rates should be studied to understand effective outreach strategies. Further, community colleges and the CDSS could explore real-time data matching that enables colleges to strategically outreach to SEFC on campus about available support and resources.

Many SEFC struggled in their first year of community college. This analysis revealed that nearly 60% of SEFC did not earn a passing grade in both terms of their first year and GPAs were generally low. Policymakers and administrators should prioritize identifying SEFC attending community college, and providing services that improve academic outcomes and persistence.

Efforts should focus on closing the 4-year graduation gap between SEFC and their peers. SEFC were 2.5 to 3 times less likely to complete a credential (associate's degree or vocational certificate) than the overall student population in community college. SEFC can face unique barriers in higher education, such as learning gaps related to their foster care involvement and less family support, which can hinder their academic progress. Now that NextUp and EOPS are available in all California community colleges, efforts should be made to identify effective practices and increase participation. Steps should also be taken to increase access to financial aid available to SEFC, especially grants that do not need to be repaid.

READ THE FULL STUDY:

Okpych, N. J., Gómez, A., & Agarwal, A. (2026). First-year and four-year community college outcomes for youth with experience in California foster care. *Child Welfare, 103*(6), 25–52. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48886068

