

# COMMITMENT TO SUCCESS

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**AN ANALYSIS OF FOSTER YOUTH CAMPUS  
SUPPORT PROGRAMS AT CALIFORNIA'S  
PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS**



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This report is dedicated to all the students with experience in foster care who are changing the narrative on the foster care experience.

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# Background

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**A**ccess to postsecondary education is key to enabling historically marginalized populations to achieve long-term economic security, yet significant disparities remain in educational access. While the number of young people with experience in foster care who enroll in post-secondary education has been steadily increasing, completion rates remain low. A 2020 report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found lower percentages of men and women who were ever in foster care had a bachelor's degree or higher (4.8% for men and 9.1% for women) compared with those who had never been in foster care (31.1% and 36.2%, respectively).<sup>1</sup> Data specific to California also points to existing disparities. By age 23 just 4.8% of individuals with experience in foster care have completed a 4-year program as compared to 28% statewide.<sup>2</sup>

These disparities stem from a combination of factors. Removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect and frequently disconnected from their families, communities,

and schools, foster youth are much more likely than their peers to lack the support necessary for a successful college experience. The long-term impacts of the experience of abuse or neglect, the trauma of removal from home, frequent school changes, higher rates of disability, and the significant likelihood of experiencing homelessness and/or food insecurity also play a role in these outcomes.

A key strategy for changing these outcomes is to ensure that foster youth have adequate support that is targeted to their specific needs while enrolled in college. Several studies have supported the efficacy of this approach for improving the post-secondary outcomes of foster youth. A 2020 study found that foster youth who participated in a campus support program were twice as likely to persist as those who did not.<sup>3</sup> A qualitative evaluation of the Renaissance Scholars Program (RSP) at UC Santa Cruz found that participants experienced a sense of belonging from program participation and valued both the staff support and material resources available through the



program. They also “gained a sense of efficacy, agency, and confidence from their participation and accomplishments within RSP.”<sup>4</sup>

A study conducted using data from California’s Community College system found that foster youth who utilized services such as counseling, educational planning, and student support grants showed improved GPAs and unit completion rates.<sup>5</sup> An evaluation released in 2021 of NextUp, a state-funded program at 46 California Community Colleges, found that foster youth participating in NextUp enrolled in credit-bearing courses at higher rates than foster youth not participating in the program (96% vs. 52%). NextUp students were also more likely to remain enrolled from term to term—68% remained enrolled versus 48% of foster youth not in NextUp.

Evidence also exists more broadly that programs combining financial, academic, and personal support can significantly improve graduation rates for students from

disadvantaged backgrounds. The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) recently published an overview of several evidence-based college completion programs at four-year postsecondary institutions that demonstrate the efficacy of such programs. For example, students in the City University of New York (CUNY), Accelerate, Complete, and Engage (ACE) program, which offers “a range of financial, academic, and personal support, including intensive academic advisement and career counseling, tuition scholarships, and textbook and transportation subsidies” had graduation rates that were nearly 16 percentage points higher than a comparison group.<sup>6</sup>

This report focuses on the landscape for foster youth support at public four-year universities and offers recommendations for how the State of California can ensure that current and former foster youth have an equitable opportunity to obtain a bachelor’s degree. John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) asked each of the 30 foster youth support programs housed at California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) campuses to complete a survey to help to better understand the current state of the field and develop recommendations for moving forward. The survey was completed by 18 of 21 CSU campuses with programs and all nine UC programs for a combined 90% completion rate. Where full surveys were not completed, JBAY followed up with program leads to get a complete data set for certain questions as noted below. JBAY also conducted two focus groups with a total of 19 program staff on October 15 and October 19, 2021, and a feedback session on November 2, 2021, with current and former foster youth who are members of the California Youth Connection Legislative Committee.



# The Current Landscape

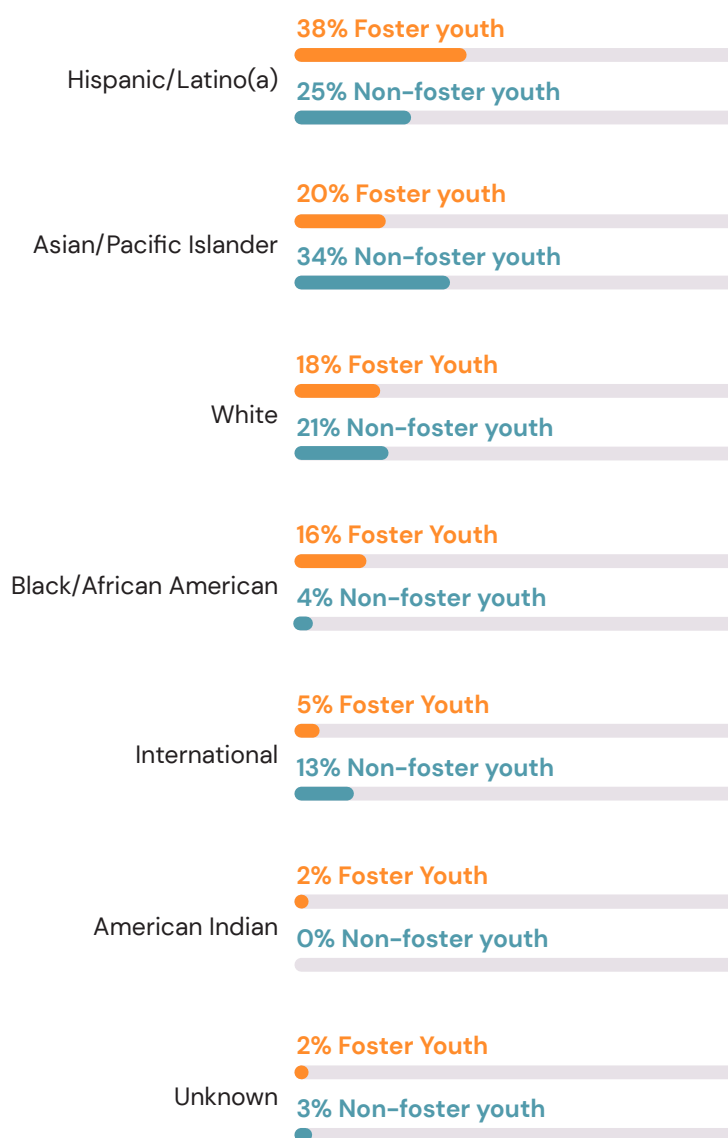
Since the first campus support program for foster youth began over twenty years ago at CSU Fullerton, each of California's three systems of public postsecondary education, as well as several private institutions, have increased their commitment to this population. Across the 22 CSU and nine UC campuses, all but one CSU now offer support programs specifically for foster youth.<sup>a</sup> At community colleges, 80 of the 116 campuses host a foster youth support program, including 46 colleges that offer the state-funded NextUp program.

The programs available at public four-year universities annually serve close to 2,700 students with experience in the foster care system, with each program serving on average 90–100 students. This diverse group of students presents with life circumstances outside the norm for most other students, and even for those who are low-income or first-generation. Trauma, homelessness, food insecurity, a lack of adult support, academic deficiencies, and mental and physical health challenges are among the circumstances that have defined and continue to define many of these students' lives.

Campus support programs for foster youth also serve a population that is more likely to be Black/African American or Latinx than the general student population. A report from the UC system found that foster youth undergraduates are more likely to be Hispanic/Latino(a) (38%) and Black/African American (16%) compared to non-foster youth undergraduates (25% and 4% respectively). They are also less likely to be

Asian/Pacific Islander (20%) and White (18%) compared to non-foster youth undergraduates (34% and 21% respectively) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: UC Undergraduates and Race/Ethnicity—Fall 2019**



<sup>a</sup> Only general education institutions were included in this research. The CSU Maritime Academy and UCSF Medical School, which do not offer support programs for students with experience in foster care, were excluded.





respondents enrolled in school reported that the pandemic had at least one negative impact on their education.<sup>7</sup>

A qualitative study conducted by a team of researchers during the summer of 2021 to better understand how foster youth students were faring relied on focus groups and interviews with both students and campus support program staff. The study found that these programs served as a lifeline to

Interviews with program staff revealed that these students on average require three to five times the level of intervention as students in other support programs. To address the myriad issues that can arise on a student's journey towards graduation, these programs, typically staffed by just one or two professionals, offer a range of services, including individualized academic and personal counseling, group activities designed to build community and enhance skills, direct financial support to address essential needs, and linkages to resources both on and off campus.

While these programs are crucial for student success at any time, their role has been even more essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies have documented the outsized impact of the pandemic on both foster youth and college students in general with large numbers reporting significant hardship. For example, a survey conducted in the Spring of 2021 found that 68% of foster youth reported that the pandemic had a direct impact on their housing, including 22% who reported experiencing an episode of homelessness since the start of the pandemic. A startling 100% of

students—using strategies such as drive-thru supply pickups, dropping supply packages off at students' homes, expanding campus and community partnerships to meet student needs, and leveraging technology to check in and communicate with students.

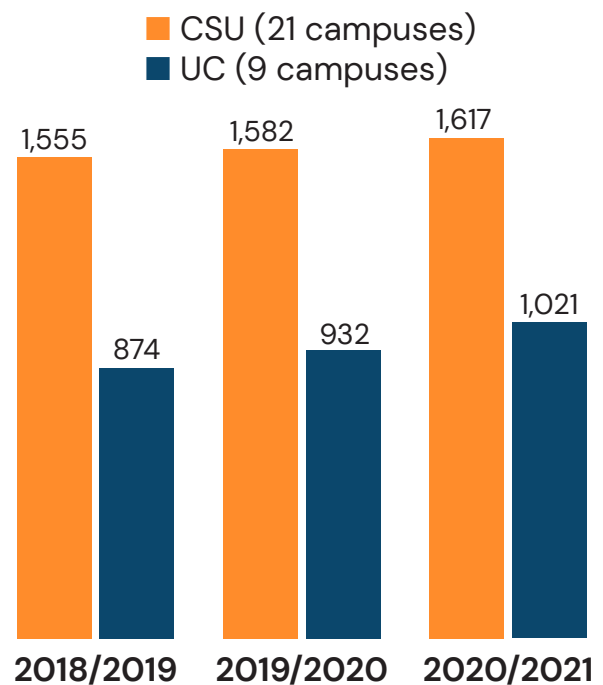
Students reported that their campus support programs played a significant role in their resilience, and they shared their appreciation for staff support, access to resources, and efforts to keep them connected and engaged. In the words of one student, "[The campus support program staff] have actually been very proactive about reaching out and like trying to make it feel like home away from home, kind of...it makes me look forward to the [virtual meetings]. And it's nice just to communicate with them and to talk with them...Yes, it's virtual, but you could see them, it's face-to-face connection from a distance. They do a very good job making you feel kind of welcome."<sup>8</sup>

# Students Served

While a substantial majority of foster youth begin their college career at a community college, there are significant numbers also enrolled in the CSU and UC systems, either as freshman or as transfer students. A recent report from the UC Office of the President reported 1,882 foster youth enrolled in 2019 across the nine undergraduate campuses, an increase from 1,494 in 2012. While data is not publicly available from the CSU system, based on the number of students served by CSU campus support programs it is estimated that the system enrolls roughly between 3,000 to 3,500 students with experience in foster care.

The JBAY survey asked campuses to report the total number of students served by foster youth campus support programs in the past three years (Figure 2). Note that the CSU numbers are reflective of 21 of the 22 campuses as Cal Poly San Luis Obispo does not offer a foster youth program. On average, each CSU program serves 77 students annually and each UC program serves 113.

**Figure 2: Students Served by Foster Youth Support Programs**

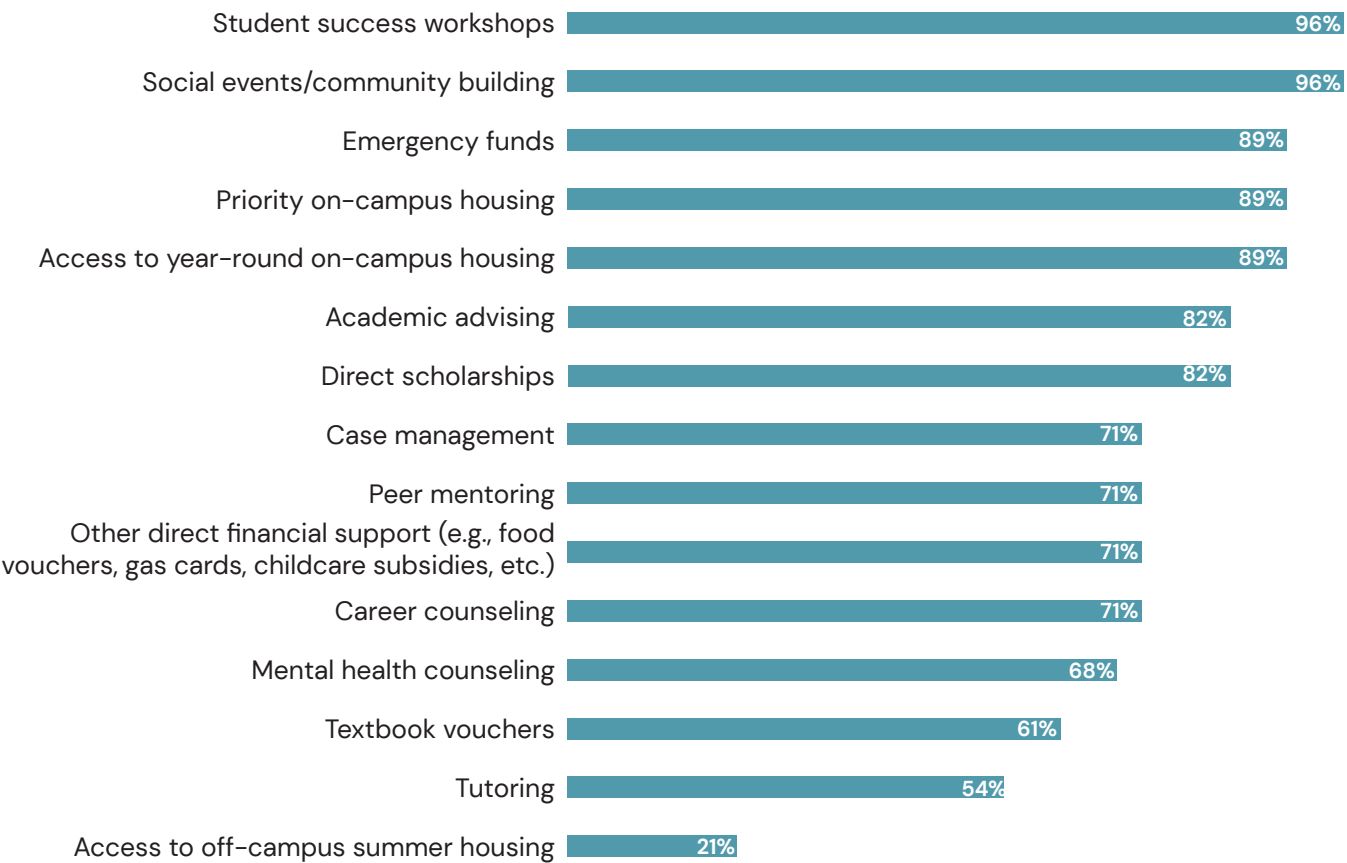


# Services Provided

While programs vary somewhat, there are also many commonalities (Figure 3). It is important to note that in addition to those services the survey asked about, program staff identified other services offered, including summer transitional programs for newly admitted students, on-campus employment, priority admissions, liaisons in key campus departments, free laptops, access to printers, care packages, and first-year seminars.

Programs were also asked whether their campus provides a dedicated space for their program. Five of nine UCs (55%) and 12 of 19 (63%) CSUs reported having a dedicated space for their program. These spaces vary considerably, however. While some programs have a robust program center that serves as a dedicated space for workshops, informal gatherings, computer and printer use, studying, and staff offices, other programs with a dedicated space share it with other support programs or have space that only accommodates staff offices.

Figure 3: Services Offered



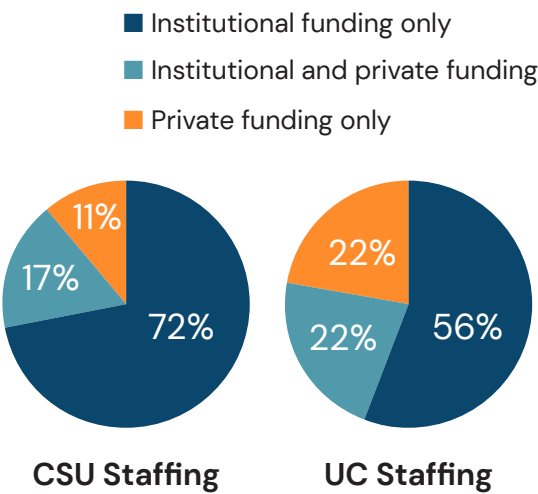


# Funding Structures

Most campus support programs for foster youth at CSUs and UCs were originally funded through private philanthropic investments and many still rely on private funding to sustain their services. Many individual institutions have chosen to allocate funding from their institutional budgets; however, this varies tremendously by campus, and the funding is often not permanent.

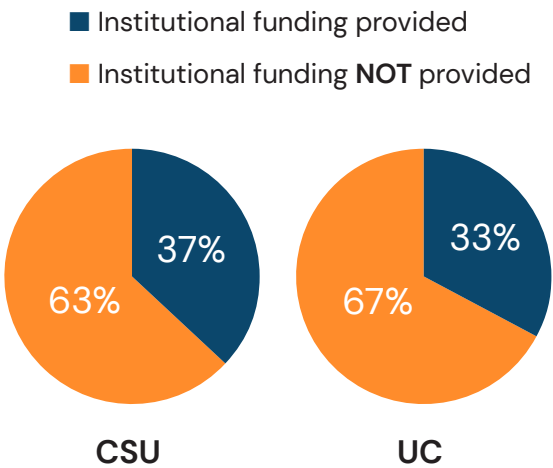
Across both systems, 85% of programs indicated that their institution pays for some portion of staffing costs, including through the use of funds designated for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Five campuses reported needing to raise additional private funds to supplement staffing. Four campuses reported that they rely 100% on private philanthropic dollars to pay for program staff (Figure 4). The level of dedicated staffing ranged between .5 FTE to 4 FTE, with programs on average having roughly 1.5 FTE staff positions, including paid student assistant roles.

Figure 4: Funding Sources for Staffing



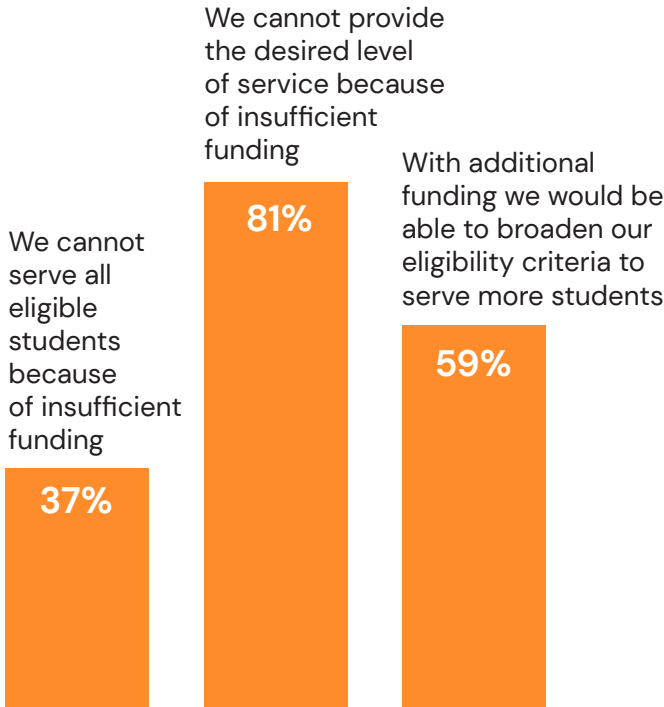
Just over one-third of campuses reported that their institution provides some funding for operational costs beyond staffing. The amounts received tend to be small (under \$8,000) and are used to cover costs such as food vouchers, textbook vouchers, and emergency funds for students as well as program activity costs (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Does the Institution Provide Funding for Operational Costs?



Across the 27 universities that responded to the survey, 96% reported that insufficient funding either limited the number of students they could serve or the range of services they could offer (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Funding Limitations**



Service gaps identified by program staff resulting from inadequate funding include:

- ✓ Inadequate space to provide services
- ✓ Inadequate staffing to meet student advising and counseling needs
- ✓ Inadequate staffing to conduct outreach to potentially eligible students
- ✓ Inadequate staffing to engage in post-graduation transition planning
- ✓ Inability to develop a peer mentoring program
- ✓ Lack of support for basic needs such as food and housing (including move-in deposit costs and funding to support summer housing)
- ✓ Inability to address emergencies
- ✓ Inability to fully cover the costs of textbooks
- ✓ Inability to offer targeted mental health services
- ✓ Inability to sufficiently address financial need gaps that contribute to issues with retention and persistence to graduation



Examples offered by respondents include:

*“A large reason why we cannot provide the desired level of service is because there is only one full time staff member. If our program had funding for a program counselor/case manager our program would be able to do so much more! For example, dedicating time to educating the campus community about scholars’ needs that in return would create a campus community that is more inclusive and understanding of our scholars’ experiences.”*

*“With only one full-time career staff, we heavily depend on undergraduate and graduate student staff that work between 3–12 hours per week. Follow-up with students is very hard and we are often providing surface level support.”*

*“The program coordinator often has to dedicate a lot of time to securing funding for the program and looking for funding opportunities, and that is time that is then not spent on direct support of scholars.”*

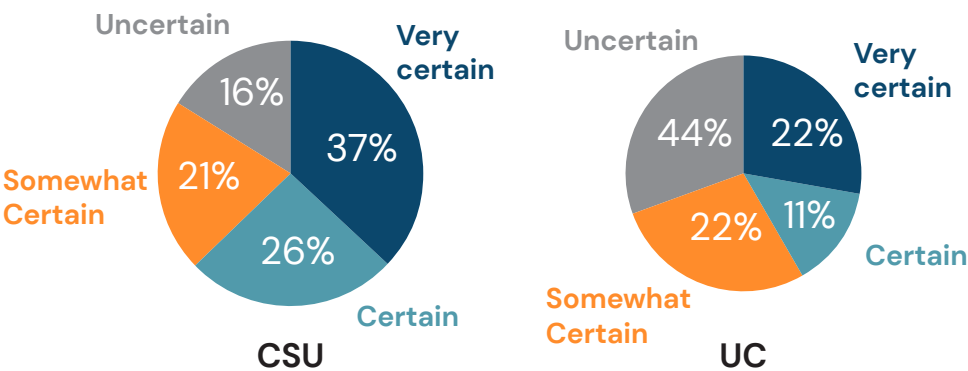
*“We would like to provide support for our students for their deposits and first month’s rent since students do not have a co-signer and often have to pay double the deposit and first month’s rent to access housing.”*

*“We conducted student surveys, and the service gaps identified by students include more access to a Program Counselor, access to peer mentors, permanent basic needs in particular, support to secure winter and summer break emergency housing assistance, as well as post-graduation planning and support.”*

In addition, the level of certainty that existing funding from institutions will remain available in the future varied considerably, with just over half of respondents feeling “very certain” or “certain” and just under half feeling “somewhat certain” or “uncertain” about sustainability (Figure 7). UCs were more likely than CSUs to view their funding as uncertain (44% vs. 16%).

Those whose funding was less certain shared about the challenges faced by a program when no stable funding source exists. One respondent said that “going year to year for fundraising is not sustainable for our program—we build as we receive soft funding, which makes what services we can provide unknown and ambiguous from one program year to the next.” Another shared that “having secured funding would make a great difference to our program in allowing us to plan ahead and spend our time providing direct support for scholars.”

Figure 7: Certainty of Funding





# Program Eligibility

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If the state were to provide funding for UC and CSU foster youth support programs, one key consideration is how eligibility for such a program should be defined. The information below describes how eligibility is currently defined at existing programs.

## EOP LIMITATION

At CSUs, in some cases, eligibility is currently limited based on the location of the program within EOP. Of the 21 CSUs with a foster youth program, 10 programs are currently housed within EOP and 11 are housed within Student Services, Student Affairs, or other department. Of the 10 programs within EOP, six require students to be admitted through EOP to participate. One respondent indicated they can make exceptions on a case-by-case basis, but others noted that this can be problematic as students may be unaware of EOP at the time of application and these foster youth are then excluded from services despite otherwise qualifying.

The UC programs are sometimes housed within a broader student services center such as UCLA's [Bruin Resource Center](#) or UC Merced's [Calvin E. Bright Success Center](#), or are a department under Academic Support/Student Services. No UC campuses require participation in EOP as a condition of participation in the foster youth program.

## POPULATIONS SERVED

### CSUs

Of the 21 CSUs with a foster youth program, 10 limit participation to foster youth only and 11 serve one or more other historically underrepresented student population. Of the 10 who serve only foster youth, six serve youth who experienced foster care at any age and four have restrictions, most commonly serving only youth who were in foster care at or after age 13.

For the 11 programs that serve students who have not been in foster care, all allowed unaccompanied homeless youth to participate in addition to foster youth. Four also included students who had received independent status for financial aid based on an appeal for special circumstances. Other eligible populations included emancipated minors and orphans.

Most programs did not have any age restrictions. Five programs had an age cap that ranged from age 24 to 30.

### UCs

Of the nine UCs, four limit services to foster youth only and five serve a broader population. None have age caps or limitations on when the student was in foster care, however one program prioritizes services for youth who emancipated from foster care and are under age 26. One program noted that students are required to attend full-time. Of the five that serve other populations, like the CSUs, additional populations served include unaccompanied homeless youth and emancipated minors. Two programs serve formerly incarcerated students and other students who are disconnected or system-impacted.

# Recommendations

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**B**ased on the findings from the program survey, a dedicated source of state funding is needed if foster youth are to have an equal shot at degree completion. With consistent funding proportionate to the needs of these students, programs will not only be able to ensure robust graduation rates for students who find their way to a CSU or UC, they will also be able to conduct additional outreach and provide assistance so that every foster youth who wants to attend and graduate from a four-year university has the support to do so. The parameters of such an allocation should include the following:

**1. Funding should be ongoing rather than one-time.** Foster youth need access to both financial support and supportive staff who can help them troubleshoot, access resources, and remain enrolled. Many campuses, however, will not hire new staff with one-time funding. One-time funds, even when available over multiple years, will pose a barrier to colleges' ability to develop the foundational systems necessary to support struggling students. For these programs to be effective they must be able to plan, which requires a commitment of ongoing funding.

**2. Funding should be used only for programs that offer services specific to the needs of foster youth.** As described previously, the needs of this population are both unique and severe. The population is also, however, small relative to the overall student body. Foster youth are often not well served by programs that assist a broad range of students. These students require programming designed to meet their unique needs and that can ensure the availability of dedicated staff who are equipped with the skills and expertise to support them.

**3. Eligible uses should be limited to expenses directly associated with foster youth programs.** This could include hiring program staff dedicated to serving the eligible population and associated training; funds for direct student support to address costs of tuition and fees, housing, food, textbooks, transportation, childcare, supplies, and other costs not addressed by available financial aid; and funds directly associated with programming such as hosting events, access to technology, mentoring and internship programs, and leadership development. Funds should not be available for use for general campus administration, serving non-eligible students, or other costs not associated with the program.

**4. Newly available funding should not supplant any existing state or institutional funding dedicated to foster youth support.** The goal of securing a state funding allocation is not only to allow for consistent funding of foster youth programs, but also to enable the existing programs to expand their available support to adequately meet the needs of students. If state funding served only to supplant existing state or institutional funding directed towards these programs, this would not accomplish this goal. As such, provisions should be put in place to ensure that current institutional funding is not supplanted.

**5. Individual campus funding should allow for base level funding to ensure a minimum level of staffing with additional funding proportionate to the need of the campus.** To provide all campuses with the ability to hire staff to implement and grow programming, a minimum amount of base funding should be allocated to each campus. Funding beyond this base amount should be allocated initially to

campuses based on the number of foster youth enrolled at each university. Subsequent ongoing funding should be based on the number being served within each program. Such a funding formula would mirror the one already in place at the Community Colleges for the NextUp program.

**6. Program rules should be structured to allow the greatest number of foster youth to participate.**

- a. Programs should not be permitted to require admission through EOP as a condition of eligibility.
- b. Program eligibility should be defined as experience in the foster care system at any time and should include those whose dependency was established by a tribal court or delinquency court as well as those whose dependency was established in another state who are now residing in California.
- c. Program rules should specify that programs may provide support with applications and matriculation for incoming students, and during summer breaks, including for direct costs such as summer housing if a student has enrolled for the upcoming Fall term. Services should also be made available for three months post-graduation or to support students who have stopped out to re-enroll.

**7. Programs should not restrict eligibility based on compliance with institutional Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements.** Research has shown that close to one-quarter of all students are impacted by SAP requirements and that foster youth are more likely to fail SAP than other students.<sup>9</sup> These students often see their academic career end after a single year, often before they have had sufficient opportunity to learn how to be a successful student. In recognition of this

reality, the legislature adopted more flexible standards for foster youth where allowable, such as for the Chafee Education and Training Voucher program<sup>10</sup> and the California College Promise Grant at community colleges.<sup>11</sup> It is crucial for this population that programs continue to provide services and assist those students to regain academic standing.

**8. Student workers should be incorporated into program structures as paid peer mentors or similar positions.** Feedback from members of California Youth Connection—a youth-led organization whose mission is to transform the foster care system through legislative, policy, and practice change—as well as from campus support program staff emphasized the value of peer-to-peer support. Program structures should incorporate positions for students with experience in foster care that both enhance programming for participants and provide leadership and professional development opportunities.

**9. Both the CSU and UC systems should be required to provide annual reports to the legislature regarding their programs.** These reports should include the following data disaggregated by campus as well as systemwide data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender: total number of students served; total foster youth enrolled on campus; and academic outcomes including retention, persistence, GPA, and graduation rates for program participants in comparison to the general student population. The report should also include a description of the types of services provided and how funds were utilized.



# Conclusion

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**A**ccess to education has long been the key to upward economic mobility and that fact remains truer today than ever before. While youth with experience in foster care face many challenges as they embark upon their post-high school educational journey, thousands of foster youth have proven that with proper support they can achieve their educational dreams. With the state of California facing record budget surpluses along with a renewed commitment to equity in recent years, now is the time to take bold steps towards ensuring that these youth have an equal shot at their desired career paths.

California is fortunate to have a robust system of support for foster youth that has emerged organically at universities across the state. The state, however, is at risk of losing these programs unless a stable source of funding is identified to take the place of time-limited institutional commitments and private funding. As the transition to state funding is made, maintaining flexibility around eligibility for services while ensuring that funds are used for the target population is key. The incorporation of student voice and ensuring transparency and accountability are principles that should guide this process as well. This combination offers a potent recipe for success that will help to ensure that youth for whom the state has taken on the role of parent have the opportunity to lead successful and fulfilling lives.



## ENDNOTES

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