

Creating Positive Change: Findings and Recommendations from Foster Youth Initiatives in the Riverside Community College District

Introduction

It is generally understood that post-secondary training correlates with higher earnings and leads to increased economic mobility. However, youth with experience in foster care face a disproportionate share of barriers to accessing higher education and persisting toward a degree, which continues to create lasting difficulties for this highly vulnerable population. According to statewide data, foster youth attending a community college trail non-foster peers in academic benchmarks, including GPA, unit success rate, and successful completion of transfer-level math and English¹. This is not to say that there has been no progress in addressing these issues. Since the creation of the first Guardian Scholars program at CSU Fullerton in 1998, post-secondary institutions have leveraged increased resources to support students with a background in foster care. The Riverside Community College District is a leading institution when it comes to supporting foster youth. Support for foster youth began small. However, thanks to ongoing support from Pritzker Foster Care Initiative and other investments, RCCD has expanded resources for foster youth, offering support staff, counselors and high school to post-secondary transition specialists.

The following paper includes a brief program history, findings on the critical program components that continue to be refined within the District, and recommendations on the ways other institutions might develop similar components.

Program History

Institutional knowledge of the unique needs of foster youth runs deeply within the Riverside Community College District. From 2005-13, RCCD served as the sole contractor responsible for delivering foster youth services for the Independent Living Program in Riverside County, on behalf of the Riverside Department of Public Social Services. Several original staff members who served as ILP coaches continue with the District today and remain working on behalf of foster youth. After the RCCD ILP contract ended in 2013, the authors of this paper became aware of a philanthropic initiative, spearheaded by the Stuart, Walter S. Johnson, Angell, and Pritzker foundations that sought to create multi-campus networks of support for college foster youth. In 2014, leveraging an existing relationship with the Guardian Scholars program director at the University of California, Riverside, Moreno Valley College and Riverside City College obtained funding from Pritzker Foster Care Initiative, creating dedicated campus support programs for foster youth. In 2018, RCCD received funding to create NextUp, a foster youth support program that was housed within each college's EOPS program. Program staff assisted foster youth students with navigating the resulting tiered support structure. Students with foster care backgrounds which did not meet NextUp eligibility guidelines received services through the Guardian Scholars program. The ensuing programmatic years have reinforced the need among Guardian Scholars staff to build flexibility into the design of their programs, after recognizing that foster youth present with a

¹ Cal-Pass Foster Youth Dashboard, 2018-2019.

myriad of needs that are distinct from other sub-populations of students. These critical supports are detailed in the remainder of this paper.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding #1: Dedicated campus space and a single point of contact are critical to foster youth success

Early investment from the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative assisted RCC in creating the Guardian Scholars Engagement Center. The Center provides a dedicated space for students to study and complete assignments, obtain food, and access computers and printers. Students also have the benefit of centralized support services and opportunities to connect and network with their peers. The program specialist/academic counselor, Student Activities clerk, and peer mentors are located in the Center and provide wrap-around support for foster youth.

The Guardian Scholars Center opened in 2018 and functions as a one-stop hub for foster youth where staff address a range of student needs related to matriculation and financial aid, and opportunities to access other resources. For example, instead of redirecting foster youth to the Financial Aid office, Guardian Scholars staff assist with FAFSA completion, document gathering, information on disbursement schedules, and Chafee status. Additionally, the program specialist conducts intakes for the campus NextUp program, providing orientation information and enrollment assistance, saving students from hopping between departments. Moreno Valley and Norco colleges operate both foster youth support programs under the EOPS umbrella, further reducing potential student confusion.

The foster youth hub concept has proven successful in terms of student engagement. In an internal student survey in which 72 students responded, the majority of Guardian Scholars students (53 percent) visited the Center once or multiple times in a week (pre-pandemic). Crucially provided support by staff members and peer mentors increased foster youth retention. In 2016-17, participating students and other self-reported foster youth (non-GS participants) had virtually the same retention rate (61 percent vs. 60 percent, respectively) within the academic year. In 2018-19, 71 percent of Guardian Scholars students were retained between terms, compared with 57 percent of non-participating foster youth.

In addition to student service duties, program staff conduct activities, such as holiday events and gatherings, club meetings, and guest speakers and workshop opportunities. The amenities at RCC include lockers for belongings, cell phone charging stations, a refrigerator for food storage, seating, study tables, and computer stations. Feedback from the program survey highlighted the critical need for identified space for foster youth. Ninety-six percent of Guardian Scholars agreed that it was important to have a dedicated space that met their needs. When asked to elaborate on how the Guardian Scholars Center had helped, one student wrote, *“The engagement center helped me with having private access to a big group of peers who I can relate to in life. It helped me with my classes, from printing assignments to getting [tutoring]. It has helped me come out of my shell and learn how to open up and trust people. I look forward to going to campus...knowing I have a safe space to enter without any judgment.”*

The centralization of foster youth services within a campus center and the comprehensive supports built into the Guardian Scholars programs have yielded positive results. Program enrollment at RCC has

grown year over year, from 10 students at the program's inception in 2014 to 202 during the fall 2019 semester.

Recommendations:

- When possible, identify a dedicated, single point of contact on campus to engage foster youth. Dedicated staff/programs can triage and resolve immediate problems that hinder a student's potential for success and connect students who require sustained interventions to additional supports.
- Create or identify a physical space on campus that functions as a hub for services, including basic needs, academic support, and financial aid advising.
- Effective communication between Guardian Scholars and NextUp programs is critical to streamlining the student experience.

Finding #2: Support for prospective college students with experience in foster care will increase the likelihood of enrollment after high school, and normalize the college experience

Data shows that transitioning from high school to college offers significant barriers for foster care students. In the Pipeline to Success Report, the Educational Results Partnership found that while 85 percent of California foster youth apply to a community college, only about 50 percent actually enroll².

To address the shortfalls and expand access and success for foster youth, Moreno Valley College, Norco College and Riverside City College created the Foster Youth Support Network (FYSN) in 2018. Funded by a California Governor's Office Award for Innovation, the FYSN program has established a regional framework for interagency collaboration among entities that serve foster youth in Riverside County and provides direct college transition support for high school foster youth within the RCCD service area.

FYSN supports each of the college's feeder high schools with an embedded RCCD student resource specialist who works with high school foster youth from RCCD's six feeder districts. The resource specialists assist with college and career preparation and leveraging the grade-specific curriculum found in the California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI) website. The FYSN resource specialists have access to student-level transcript information through CCGI, which provides the opportunity for more well-informed advising sessions. For seniors, the assigned resource specialist assists students with each step of the post-secondary matriculation process, including college applications, FAFSA/Chafee Grant applications, educational planning, and course registration. Once steps are complete, the resource specialists facilitate the hand-off of students to the campus Guardian Scholars program. Student interactions are recorded within a customized database, providing staff the ability to view the history of support with each student, and for program administrators to access data on foster youth activities, applications and enrollment. In addition to work with local high schools, FYSN resource specialists monitor college applications submitted by foster youth and connect with prospective students to provide matriculation and financial aid support.

² Pipeline to Success Report, Educational Results Partnership and John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2019.

The infrastructure provided by FYSN afforded RCC the opportunity to receive funding from the California College Pathway fund to create a Foster Youth Dual Enrollment Pilot project. Dual enrollment has been shown to support college access for a range of underrepresented populations. The College is seeking to increase access through existing College and Career Access (CCAP) courses that are offered in local high schools. The RCC FYSN resource specialist assisted 36 foster youth with the dual enrollment process, 16 of which successfully registered for classes between spring of 2021 and spring of 2022. Recruitment is again underway for foster youth to enroll for the fall 2022 semester.

Foster youth who participate in the dual enrollment program receive individual assistance from the resource specialist through weekly check-in meetings and progress monitoring during the semester, helping to troubleshoot issues related to technology or academic needs. Students receive an orientation prior to the start of the semester, as well as the opportunity to attend financial literacy training conducted by Student Financial Services. Planning for future meetings includes a career exploration and study skills workshop. For every dual enrollment course successfully completed, foster youth participants receive a stipend to celebrate their success.

FYSN resource specialists interact with 657 prospective youth currently enrolled in the local high schools. The resource specialists have provided 5,316 unique services to 1,131 9th through 12th grade foster youth students since the program's implementation, and 350 foster youth from District feeder high schools have successfully registered with a college within RCCD. The first-year FYSN cohort realized a 67 percent persistence rate from fall 2019 to the spring 2020 semester, on par with the Guardian Scholars cohort and significantly outpacing the average persistence rate of non-participating foster youth, which stands at 55 percent. For students receiving FYSN transition services in high school, 88 percent reported that targeted college enrollment to help foster youth in high school was important or very important. Regarding the FYSN program, one student reported that staff *"helped me in high school by helping me choose what classes I wanted to take in college, and also introduced me to what I can expect from those classes. Without this service, I honestly don't know what I would have done."*

Recommendations:

- College foster youth staff should find opportunities to engage with prospective students early, providing individualized support tailored to each student's needs.
- Provide foster youth program information to college outreach personnel, ensuring staff are well-versed in the supports offered.
- Connect with K-12 district foster youth liaisons/school counselors and collaborate on foster youth recruitment and onboarding.
- Offer dual enrollment opportunities to high school foster youth and provide support for the enrollment process and college learning environment.

Finding #3: Community partners are integral to successful college foster youth support programs

The implementation of the RCCD Foster Youth Support Network program established stronger working relationships with community organizations that provide services to foster youth. Through FYSN, RCCD has taken a leadership role within the Foster Youth Executive Advisory Council (EAC), in partnership with the Riverside County Office of Education's Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP). The EAC brings together foster youth representatives from K-12 districts, the Riverside Department of Public Social Services, college foster youth program advisors, and staff from the county Independent Living Program (ILP). This collaborative is responsible for cross-case management, identifying gaps in services, highlighting best practices, and developing joint events and interventions for foster youth. Frequent meetings with community and school district partners ensure that foster youth in the region receive holistic services.

The partnership with RCOE has yielded benefits for students, including increased attendance at each college's Foster Youth Welcome Day event. Foster youth students in grades 9 through 12 are bussed to the campuses where they hear a program orientation, receive lunch, a campus tour, financial aid information, and the opportunity to network with college foster youth students. Frequent collaboration between RCCD and RCOE contributed to the delivery of efficient services to students during the annual JBAY-sponsored FAFSA Challenge. FYSN resource specialists provide one-on-one assistance with FAFSA completion and ensure that necessary verifications are submitted to their respective colleges. Over 60 percent of Riverside County foster youth are enrolled in RCCD feeder high schools, and the direct services provided by these specialists have helped Riverside County win the large county FAFSA Challenge for five consecutive rounds. The most recent round yielded a 67 percent FAFSA completion rate for Riverside foster youth, despite enormous challenges posed by COVID-19.

RCCD is represented on the leadership team of the Southern California Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium and participates on the Riverside DPSS Independent Living Program consortium. Moreno Valley College, Norco College and Riverside City College established strong partnerships with local organizations, including non-profit and county transitional housing programs, HUD, CalFresh, United Way, and other college/university foster youth programs.

Recommendations:

- College foster youth program staff should make connections with the local county FYSCP program. To the extent possible, explore data sharing opportunities so that colleges can outreach to foster youth in the community more efficiently.
- Offer opportunities for foster youth to visit the college, take a tour, etc. to help normalize the college experience for students, and inform them of available program benefits.
- Programs should be well-acquainted with local organizations that provide support services necessary to sustain enrollment for foster youth with special attention paid to necessities.

Finding #4: Colleges must address the frequent shortfall of basic needs that many foster youth experience during the time they are enrolled

Campus foster youth programs play a direct role in assisting students with access to basic needs. In an internal RCC Guardian Scholars program survey, 40 percent of respondents indicated they had prior challenges with securing stable housing and 39 percent reported problems with regular access to food. Another 31 percent of respondents indicated that they lacked access to resources that support positive mental health.

RCCD colleges are proactive when it comes to securing necessities that help foster youth remain enrolled. Referrals for transitional housing programs for foster youth experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity are regularly provided by staff. Staff have leveraged a partnership with the Riverside Housing Authority, and direct referrals for the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) housing voucher program are provided. Eligible foster youth can use these vouchers to secure an apartment within the county.

Campus staff address food insecurity in several ways. At RCC, five Guardian Scholars students serve as CalFresh ambassadors, working to reduce the stigma around applying for support. Support staff assist students with the CalFresh application, and work with DPSS eligibility workers to verify enrollment in supportive services. In the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when there was an imposed stay at home order, the campuses partnered with Foster Nation's Meal Nation program, which provided one meal a day from local establishments to foster youth. To this day, foster youth continue to benefit from the program. Grocery cards and campus cafeteria vouchers are also made available to Guardian Scholars in need.

Many foster youth struggle generally with financial stability. In addition to housing and food support, Guardian Scholars programs also assist students with emergency funds designed to mitigate problems that could lead a student to dropping out of school. It is common for programs to provide financial support that foster youth can use to catch up on rent, make a housing deposit, repair their vehicle, or help pay for childcare.

Program staff focus on keeping students aware of resources that will help support positive mental health. Programs have made connections with health service professionals, regularly making referrals for students facing crises or needing therapy. Connections have also been established with local Transition Age Youth centers in the community. These TAY drop-in centers provide a range of services, including LGBTQ workshops and counseling opportunities, providing a supportive environment for peer engagement.

Students say these programs are a good resource for getting access to necessities. When asked to rate to what extent the Guardian Scholars program has helped with access to basic needs, 92 percent of those surveyed indicated that the program was extremely helpful (highest possible comment) in providing assistance. In the same survey, when asked if the Guardian Scholars program provides a safe and welcoming environment, another student wrote, *"by far my experience has been so great that once Covid ends I am not taking my college experience ever for granted. I looked forward to going to school*

every day, knowing I had an awesome support system [there], since I don't have one personally. It helps me become who I want to be in life."

Recommendations:

- Although foster youth enter college facing a host of challenges, campus-based programs can be ready by building a resource list from within their own community that can assist with transitional housing, food pantries, and other needs.
- College programs need to ensure students apply for and receive CalFresh benefits. Too often, county eligibility workers are unfamiliar with requirement changes that ultimately allow foster youth participating in campus programs to be eligible for benefits. Proactive calls on behalf of students can help remove this barrier.

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