



Foster Youth: State Support for Higher Education

Background

Research indicates that current and former foster youth (hereinafter, “foster youth”) face barriers in enrolling and completing post-secondary education. Along with specific federal programs, states are increasingly playing a role in providing support to foster youth attending institutions of higher education. Education-focused programs targeted to foster youth have generally not been rigorously evaluated to determine if they help this population in college.

Casey Family Programs, a foundation that supports child welfare program research and development, has proposed a framework that addresses both how to create and sustain a program of post-secondary educational support for foster youth and what the program should include. The framework envisions educational support programs that give foster youth access to a caring and trusted program staff person who has primary responsibility for helping the youth navigate higher education. **Table 1** shows key features of program development and student support.

Table 1. Casey Framework for Postsecondary Educational Programs Targeted to Foster Youth

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated leadership • Internal and external champions • Collaboration with social service and other organizations • Data-driven decisionmaking • Staff peer support and professional development • Sustainability planning
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year-round housing and other basic needs • Financial aid • Academic advising, career counseling, and supplemental support • Personal guidance, counseling, and supplemental support • Opportunities for student community engagement and leadership • Planned transitions to college, between colleges, and from college to employment

Source: Casey Family Programs, 2010.

A Congressional Research Service (CRS) review of state supports for foster youth attending institutions of higher education found that some states do offer the kinds of direct student services described in the Casey framework, although they may not always be available on a statewide basis. In conducting its review, CRS looked at statutes for all states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (“states”); websites for state educational and human resources agencies; and an online database for higher

education resources maintained by Western Michigan University’s Center for Fostering Success. (The review did not include assistance for high school students preparing to attend college.) CRS found that state higher education resources for foster youth generally fall into four categories: (1) student support services once they are on campus; (2) scholarships and grants; (3) tuition waivers; and (4) assistance for housing.

Some of these supports are available at public colleges and universities statewide and others are available at specific campuses. A state or campus may have a comprehensive program that provides multiple resources such as tuition assistance and social supports. The CRS review likely does not capture all of the possible state-funded higher education resources available to foster youth, and is not exhaustive of all the possible information on each identified educational resource. It also does not identify how some private universities and organizations, such as philanthropic groups, support foster youth in attending college. Nonetheless, a small number of private colleges were captured in the search. In addition, the review found that some state or public university resources are funded in whole or part by private dollars.

Student Support

As described in **Table 1**, postsecondary educational programs for foster youth include people and services that can help them succeed as students. University leaders, mentors, academic advisors, tutors, and peer advocates are the individuals often involved in these programs. Student support services can include helping foster youth find housing, connect to services on campus, and advocate for their own needs, in addition to providing community building activities and care packages. The CRS review identified over 80 such support programs at colleges and universities in approximately 20 states. For example, the Horns Helping Horns program at the University of Texas at Austin seeks to “foster academic success and a sense of community” for foster youth. The program provides a faculty or staff mentor and a small peer group that offer guidance to help students navigate campus life.

A small number of programs (e.g., California College Pathways, Florida Reach, Washington State Passport to College Promise Scholarship Program) support institutions of higher education (and sometimes other entities) in assisting foster youth. The Passport to College program is state funded and provides scholarships for students who were in foster care. It also gives incentive funding for state college campuses to provide recruitment and retention services for these students, and has a partnership with the College Success Foundation to provide both student services to foster youth and training for campus staff.

Scholarships and Grants

Scholarships, grants, stipends, allowances, or fee exemptions are available specifically for current and former foster youth to cover the cost of attending post-secondary educational institutions and specified related expenses. Approximately 20 states and a few dozen college campuses in about 10 states provide this type of financial support. Assistance is generally provided to youth who have spent a certain amount of time in care, meet age requirements, and attend an in-state institution of higher education.

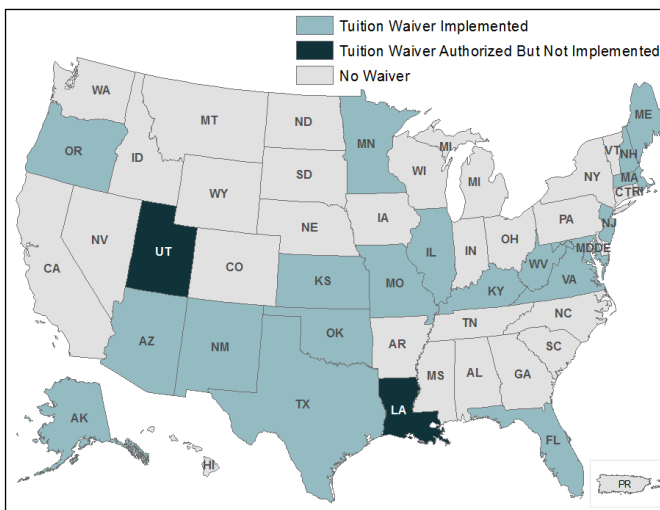
For example, Hawaii authorizes a monthly stipend to cover the living expenses of students ages 18 to 27 who were formerly in foster care. The voucher is provided for up to 60 months, so long as the youth show they are making progress toward completing the program, among other requirements. The Iowa Opportunity Foster Care Grant provides an annual grant for any college expenses (e.g., meal plans, transportation, books, and supplies) for foster youth between the ages of 17 and 23, including youth who were adopted after age 16.

Universities and colleges that provide direct financial support to foster youth generally do so as part of a larger support program for these students. For example, the Michigan State University Foster Youth Endowed Scholarship program provides scholarship funding to youth who were in foster care as teens, including youth who were adopted or placed in kinship care. The program also matches youth with a mentor and provides other supports.

Tuition Waivers

Separate from scholarships and grants, 19 states cover the cost of tuition through what are referred to as “tuition waivers” targeted to foster youth. Waivers cover the tuition at public community colleges, universities, and/or vocational schools. Waivers in some states also cover fees. Generally, waivers are available for higher education campuses within the state. All of the waivers are specified in state statute.

Figure 1. Tuition Waivers Specifically for Foster Youth



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS) review of state statutes and correspondence with selected states.

The waiver programs include eligibility criteria. Such criteria often include requiring that the youth have been in foster care for a particular period, are of a certain age (e.g., not yet 21), and are in good academic standing. Some states have additional requirements, such as that youth engage in community service (Arizona) or are employed if possible (Minnesota). Some of the waivers are provided on a limited basis. For example, Alaska allows for a maximum of 15 students to be supported with waivers each year at any University of Alaska campus. The Arizona statute specifies that the tuition waivers end in 2019.

Housing Assistance

Some foster youth who live on campus do not have a place to stay during school breaks. As shown in **Table 2**, the CRS review found that two states (California and Texas) require public universities to provide or ensure housing during breaks. Selected campuses in Michigan (Michigan State University, Northern Michigan University, Western Michigan University), New Jersey (Rutgers University), South Carolina (Johnson C. Smith University) and Vermont (College of St. Josephs) provide housing to foster youth during breaks. In addition, some states provide financial assistance that can be used for housing.

Table 2. Excerpted California and Texas Statutes on Providing Housing for Foster Youth

State	Statute
CA	Campuses with the University of California (UC) must give priority to eligible foster youth for on-campus housing and allow them to remain in housing that is available during academic breaks at no extra charge. (<i>California Education Code §92660</i>) The California State University (CSU) and California Community Colleges must review housing issues for emancipated foster youth living in college dorms to ensure basic housing during the regular academic year, including vacations and holidays other than summer break. (<i>California Education Code §89342</i>)
TX	At the eligible foster youth’s request, public institutions of higher education must assist the student in locating temporary housing during breaks. They must also provide temporary housing or a stipend for temporary housing (if not otherwise covered) for foster youth who demonstrate financial need. (<i>Texas Education Code §51.978</i>)

Source: Congressional Research Service.

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Adrienne L. Fernandes-Alcantara, Specialist in Social Policy

Sarah W. Caldwell, Senior Research Librarian

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