



$$\frac{b^2 - 4ac}{4a^2} = 0$$

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# MAKING A DIFFERENCE: CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES TARGET PROBLEMS OF FOSTER YOUTH

By Timothy Bonnel



**T**he most exciting part of working in student aid is witnessing, first-hand, the difference we can make in people's lives. Student services professionals often end up in the field by happenstance or necessity, but those who remain in the profession are generally those who strongly value the experience of helping others. For those who have a passion of making the difference, the California Community College System's "Foster Youth Success Initiative" offers a model that can help improve the lives of a frequently overlooked student population: youth from foster care.

## Students Tangled in the System

Youth from foster care are among the least likely to participate in postsecondary education. Less than 3% of children from foster care environments in California ever make it to college and far fewer complete a certificate or degree program. These youth struggle to survive and to find stability while growing up in the foster care system. They often give little or no thought to their future education or employment and find themselves on their own without adequate support from an overwhelmed and under-resourced social service system. Unfortunately, a significant percentage of these youth also find themselves entangled in the justice system.

In California, student services representatives began learning about the crisis facing youth from foster care through meetings with public and private agencies, advocates, foster parents and service providers, and current and former youth from foster care. While the issue is ripe for public policy solutions, lack of funding and consensus makes it unlikely that there will be significant improvement in the near future. Nonetheless, many of the challenges faced by youth transitioning from foster care to independence could be addressed by student service professionals. By focusing existing resources, programs, and services on identifying and serving youth from foster care, we found we can make a difference in the lives of students, one student at a time.

## Addressing a Critical Need

To achieve the goal of increasing access for foster students, representatives from the community college system sought support from colleagues in the California Community College Chancellor's Office. The Chancellor's Office established formal integrated student services program workgroups, which included leadership from Financial Aid, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, Cooperative Agency Resource for Education (CARE), CalWORKS, and Transfer. The workgroups were convened to define strategies for complying with these mandates and to define implementation guidelines.

Once the problem was identified and workgroups were formed, the next and most important step was to learn how to best serve the unique needs of this population of students. The task force met with Tracy Fried, a social worker with significant experience working with "at risk youth" and youth from foster care. With her help, our office established an integrative student services model to better identify and serve youth from foster care. This initial project included the development of a statewide "how to" manual for college staff, a three-day implementation training, and ongoing technical support to the Chancellor's Office and our community colleges.

The task force also conducted extensive research and gathered information through a variety of methods, including:

- Convening Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI) Planning Committee and Statewide Taskforce Meetings that included national, state, and local experts spanning several different disciplines
- Attending related educational forums
- Surveying over 100 current and former youth from foster care
- Conducting an extensive literature review across the following disciplines:
  - Child welfare
  - Higher education
  - K-12 education
  - Child advocacy
  - Youth from foster care association publications
  - Probation and juvenile court

- Federal and state laws, regulations, and sub-regulatory guidelines

A small group of key state and local leaders representing financial aid and Independent Living Programs (ILP) also met to assist in identifying issues and conceptualizing a framework for the FYSI effort.

The FYSI Planning Committee then created a task force of stakeholders and experts representing areas that impact youth in foster care who want to pursue postsecondary education. The task force included representatives from legislative offices and legal advocate offices, nonprofit youth service groups, student aid associations, local, state, and county agencies, community colleges, and youth in and from the foster care system. This task force assisted in identifying:

- Needs of current and former foster care youth in pursuing postsecondary education
- Critical elements for successfully engaging in outreach and in-reach
- Key college student support services and off-campus resources
- Strategies for linking the students to these services

## Educating College Staff

To educate college student services staff committed to the challenges of identifying, communicating with, and serving youth from foster care, we developed curriculum and training materials. The resulting manual of nearly 300 pages covers a wide range of topics including:

- Glossary of terms
- Understanding youth from foster care
- Defining "ward of the court" for student aid purposes
- Verification of foster care status for student aid
- "Out of home" placements in the juvenile justice system
- Use of professional judgment in student aid
- Understanding dependency overrides in student aid
- Education Training Vouchers—Chafee Grants

- Sensitive approaches to communicating with youth from foster care
- Existing postsecondary education programs, practices and collaborative efforts
- A self-evaluation tool for postsecondary education
- How to develop a service project for youth from foster care
- Liaison's roles and responsibilities
- Serving youth from foster care who have disabilities
- Data collection, reporting, and accountability

A companion 400-page Statewide County Resource Guide was also researched and developed identifying crucial community resources for youth including:

- Disability Program Navigators
- Education: GED, adult education, colleges
- Medi-Cal eligibility for foster youth
- Employment
- Housing
- Health care and physical well-being
- Mental health care
- Substance-abuse resources
- Planned Parenthood

## Designated Shepherds

FYSI was officially launched in November of 2006 with a call to all California community colleges to designate a campus liaison to shepherd youth from foster care through the intricate maze of postsecondary education. The plan calls for liaisons to help these students to plan for and navigate through admissions and registration, assessment services and counseling, and applications for financial aid, and to take advantage of other student and academic support services. The goal was successful matriculation, retention, and program completion for youth from foster care.

Through presentations made at student services conferences and Chancellor's Office updates, we received many volunteers to serve as FYSI. These volunteers included foster youth advocates, youth from foster care who are currently working in our college financial aid offices or

other student services programs, as well as those who support the foster youth cause through volunteer activities or donations in their community. They assist with the FYSI program and serve as FYSI liaisons. from presentations made at student services conferences and in Chancellor's Office updates.

### **Service Networks Offer Individual Assistance**

Before actively engaging the foster care agencies and organizations in local communities for postsecondary education referrals, it was important to develop an on-campus network of committed individuals for serving these youth. Unless appropriate types and levels of individualized assistance could be provided, outreach activities recruiting youth from care to college could result in frustration and resignation.

Building an effective service network required establishing a Foster Youth Services team on campus. Designees from all student services and academic support programs were recruited to serve on the Foster Youth Services teams and briefed on challenges facing youth from foster care. These designees were committed to assisting with program services and benefits. Team members provided personal referrals to students being served by the FYSI project, thereby ensuring connection and smooth transition through each step of the postsecondary education process. It was critical to involve representations from as many student services areas as possible, including:

- Outreach and recruiting
- Financial aid
- Disabled student services
- Health services
- Admissions and records
- Extended opportunity programs
- Academic and career counseling
- Academic assessment
- Retention services
- Tutoring and academic support
- Housing
- Business office

### **Building a Bridge to College**

Establishing relationships in our local community with these youth and the people that serve them has been another critical part of building a seamless system for serving youth from foster care. Of immediate concern as we rolled out the FYSI was outreach to high school seniors or youth who have just recently transitioned from foster care. They are perhaps the most vulnerable students, as they lack any true means of support or a support network, and often struggle to manage the responsibility of independence thrust upon them at 18 years of age.

One of the greatest challenges to serving youth is developing a common understanding of the vocabulary we use to describe their circumstances. For example, when a youth ages out of foster care, they are described by the social service system as “emancipating youth,” and yet in the financial aid world, emancipation of a youth from parental care does not entitle a student to file as an independent; “dependent (or ward) of the court” in the social service or juvenile justice system is considered independent for financial aid. Once we were able to identify common vernacular used by the various agencies and organizations serving youth from foster care, we could begin to educate each other about what the youth felt was confusing and contradictory terminology.

### **Outreach Must Be Ongoing**

While urgent outreach is critical during the transition to independence, early and regular outreach is the foundation to creating college awareness and fostering a college-going culture among youth in foster care. Ideally, all youth from care would already be engaged in planning a postsecondary educational experience and would be aware of financial aid, and student assessment and support programs. However, the reality for youth from care is demonstrated in the aforementioned college-going rates. With less than 3% ever going to college, it is clear that much work needs to be done.

Personal contact by student services

representatives with youth from foster care and those that serve them is essential to disseminate college and financial aid information. The education process should begin no later than the junior year of high school and continue through transition from foster care to independence, and hopefully for a growing percentage to, and through, college.

In California, the county social service systems maintain case workers and Independent Living Programs designed to educate soon-to-be-emancipating youth on life skills needed for independence and to assist youth in their transition to independence and personal responsibility. In addition, the county offices of education also provide a Foster Youth Service Coordinator to work with administrators and counselors in local K-12 schools to provide support and advocacy for youth from foster care. To ensure that youth have access to postsecondary education, it is absolutely fundamental that leadership and staff from these programs be educated on the requirements and process for college application, student aid, enrollment, continued matriculation, and program completion.

### **Reporting and Evaluating Service**

Because each community college has unique needs, we provided numerous options for tracking data about the status of foster care youth. More important than the type of data tracking system used was the actual data elements being captured. Consistency and uniformity in this area will ensure more accurate comparison and analysis across all California community colleges.

The community colleges compile data through a *Student Progress at a Glance Report* that identifies foster youth and describes the actions taken to assist them. The report includes current information regarding each student's contact information, what student and academic support services referrals have been made, where the student is in the student aid process, and other information pertinent to student success. This report is intended to assist in the student's retention and eventual achievement of his or her academic goals.

Schools report on student progress using a unique identifier for each youth served. This allows the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to access the statewide community college Management Information System data to:

- Summarize statewide FYSI participation by college and district
- Summarize data by student services and academic support programs participation
- Analyze participant data for retention, persistence and success patterns
- Evaluate and communicate best practices to other participating institutions and to new colleges beginning such efforts.

### Sustaining Progress

Since 2006, FYSI has shifted its focus from creation and implementation to sustainability. We continue to hold statewide conference calls with liaisons to provide technical support and ongoing training, as well as to monitor the program. We have set up a regional structure to coordinate local and regional activities with colleges and partners in adjacent counties. This structure includes appointed regional representatives to advise the Chancellor's Office semi-annually on challenges related to FYSI and the resources required to support ongoing services to youth from foster care.

We also have developed additional tools to facilitate knowledge-sharing, idea exchanges, and ongoing networking and training opportunities.

We have established an administrative resource Web page for our liaisons and foster youth service teams, as well as a youth-friendly page to assist foster youth in taking the first step toward postsecondary education. *The FYSI California Community College Liaison Directory*, *FYSI Manual* and companion *FYSI County Resource Guides* soon will be published on CD for distribution to all colleges and their partners.

In addition, we have established both a closed internal listserv for California community college FYSI communications as well as an open public listserv for our FYSI liaisons and teams to commu-

nicate with community partners statewide from k-12, social services and private community and faith-based organizations serving youth from foster care.

We are planning eight to 10 regional trainings in the near future to convene colleges and their community partners in an effort to establish and enhance communications and to plan the integration of services to serve youth from foster care. We are also in joint discussions with representatives from the California Department of Social Services and the California Department of Education to investigate the feasibility of presenting a joint conference featuring best practices for serving youth from foster care.

### Take One Step Every Day

Needless to say, it is a daunting task to manage the organization and implementation of FYSI in the 109 colleges and throughout the 58 California counties. It has been just eight short months since the colleges designated a liaison to serve youth from foster care and less than six months since we convened our liaisons for training. Progress comes incrementally, and while it is still too early to measure statistically, success can be evaluated from the types of questions that asked, materials requested, and relationships established and flourishing. College liaisons from around the state call and e-mail regularly with questions or to share success stories.

The momentum of the project is sustained by taking time each day to initiate a new relationship—whether it is with a newly identified youth, a community service provider, or a valuable resource or colleague on campus—to further the FYSI cause, and to “Make the Difference” in the life of a youth from foster care.

Now I would like to issue a personal challenge to other NASFAA members to find ways to help the foster youth population in your area. Go ahead, try it... Bet you can't help just one!

**Timothy Bonnel is Coordinator of Student Financial Assistance Programs for California Community College Chancellor's Office. He**

