

ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND FEDERAL POLICY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research finds that only 3 to 4% of youth who transition out of the foster care system will obtain a four-year college degree, with less than 1% earning a master's degree; a disparity driven by financial barriers, inadequate educational support, and systemic instability (Watt, et al., 2019). To expand higher education access for students with foster care experience, Congress should 1) Direct the U.S. Department of Education to establish and fund a grant program for the implementation, development, and expansion of campus-based support programs for students with foster care experience, including academic, financial, and mentorship services and, 2) Amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to increase transparency in higher education tuition waiver programs by mandating state reporting of standardized, accessible information on eligibility, benefits, and cost-of-attendance (COA) coverage for students with foster care experience.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

After aging out of the Nevada foster care system, I faced significant challenges in my transition to higher education, including systemic barriers and limited access to consistent support. Gaps in information, resources, and mentorship made it difficult to fully prioritize academic responsibilities, as I was often focused on making ends meet. These experiences have driven my passion for child welfare advocacy, leading with my lived experience to inform and influence policy, particularly regarding access to higher education for students with foster care experience. Through advocacy work at both the state and federal levels, I have seen firsthand the critical role that coordinated support systems play in student success. At the same time, I have observed how inconsistencies in tuition waiver policies and limited transparency in available supports can create confusion and reinforce systemic distrust among students with foster care experience. My lived and professional experience has shaped my commitment to advancing access to higher education for students with foster care experience by strengthening support systems and improving access to clear, reliable information.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Higher education is widely associated with improved educational attainment, career outcomes, and personal development. Although often not due to lack of ambition, youth in foster care experience significantly lower rates

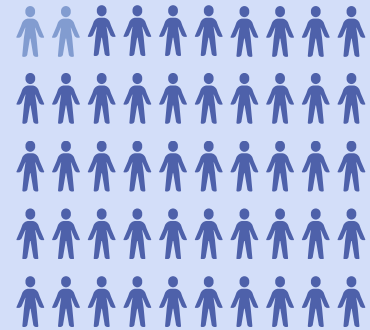
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

of college enrollment and degree completion compared to their peers. Research indicates “...84% of 17 to 18-year-old youth in foster care want to go to college – but only 20% follow through on their ambitions... Other research finds that only 3 to 4% of youth who transition out of foster care will obtain a four-year college degree” (Boykin, 2025). These disparities demonstrate systemic and structural barriers, including financial constraints and limited access to consistent academic and social support. These challenges are further exacerbated by insufficient communication and awareness regarding available resources, including tuition waiver programs and campus-based support designed to support students with foster care experience.

For students transitioning to higher education, support is critical to the longevity and success of their academic studies. Campus-based support programs have emerged to bridge this gap, through utilization of mentorship, increased access to resources, and wrap-around services designed to support academic, financial, and social needs. However, just over half of states have specific campus-based support programs for students with foster care experience, leaving a significant gap in educational access in numerous states (Loudenback, 2018). Federal policy leadership through the U.S. Department of Education plays an important role in addressing these disparities by supporting the expansion of campus-based support programs nationwide. An example of a comprehensive campus-based support model is California’s approach to supporting students with foster care experience in higher education, including programs such as the Guardian Scholars Program. These programs provide students with resources such as priority enrollment, priority on-campus housing, and access to a foster youth liaison trained to support students in navigating academic systems (CDSS, 2026). California’s model demonstrates how coordinated, campus-based supports can increase student success rates by addressing both academic and non-academic barriers. Implementation, development, and expansion of campus-based support programs is essential to strengthening support systems and ensuring that students with foster care experience receive the accessible resources needed to succeed academically.

For students with foster care experience, the financial burden of higher education can be overwhelming, and is further exacerbated by state tuition waivers not being available across all states. “As of 2023, there are 35 states that have some type of statewide postsecondary education tuition waiver or scholarship program for students who have been in foster care” (University of Washington, 2019), leaving 15 states without any dedicated statewide tuition support beyond Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETV). Additionally, among the 35 states with programs, eligibility criteria, age limits, and award amounts vary widely, resulting in inconsistent access to benefits across states. Research indicates “youth who have been in foster care take longer to attain degrees than their non-foster

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THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

care peers; time limits connected to these financial aid programs should be informed by this research” (Geiger, 2018).

Additionally, research states “the [foster youth tuition waiver] is not used by 40% of the youth who are eligible to use it” (Watt, et al., 2020), a disparity driven by limited awareness and inaccessible information regarding eligibility, benefits, and application processes. These findings demonstrate the need to amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to increase transparency in higher education tuition waiver programs by requiring states to publicly report standardized, accessible information on eligibility, benefits, and cost-of-attendance (COA) coverage for students with foster care experience. Establishing this federal transparency requirement is critical to ensuring that students with foster care experience have access to clear and reliable information and are able to fully utilize the supports available to them.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To advance higher education access for students with foster care experience, Congress should:

- **Direct the U.S. Department of Education to establish and fund a grant program for the implementation, development, and expansion of campus-based support programs** for students with foster care experience, including academic, financial, and mentorship services.
- **Amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to increase transparency in higher education tuition waiver programs** by mandating state reporting of standardized, accessible information on eligibility, benefits, and cost-of-attendance (COA) coverage for students with foster care experience.