

College Supports for Youth in Foster Care in California Pathways to Success and Empowerment

Attending college offers numerous benefits, including increased career opportunities, higher earning potential, and personal development. It can also lead to expanded personal and professional networks, increased self-awareness, and the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. College can provide a supportive environment and access to resources that can contribute to academic and personal success.

According to the [Public Policy Institute of California](#), “Over the last decade, the college wage premium—the difference in wages between college graduates and comparable high school graduates—has plateaued at historically high levels. In 2023, workers with a bachelor’s degree earned on average 61 percent more than high school graduates (compared to 40% more in 1990), while those with graduate degrees earned 89 percent more (60% in 1990).

California workers with a bachelor’s degree earn a median annual wage of \$90,000; only 5 percent of workers without a high school diploma and 12 percent of those whose highest level of education is a high school diploma [earn as much](#). Indeed, bachelor’s degree holders in the bottom quarter of the wage distribution earn more than 75 percent of workers without a high school diploma and half of workers with at most a high school diploma.”

Understanding the Challenges

The foster care experience often includes instability and educational disruptions, leaving many youth in foster care in need of additional support to access and complete higher education. There is available support for youth in foster care throughout their college journey.

On-Campus Support Programs

A network of on-campus programs offers tailored, student-centered services at California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and University of California campuses.

- Guardian Scholars Program: Operating at many community colleges and California State Universities and University of California campuses, Guardian Scholars provides comprehensive support designed exclusively for youth in foster care and former foster youth. There is no formal application process to participate in Guardian Scholars. Identifying yourself on the [FAFSA](#) form triggers notice to the campus Guardian Scholars program and your campus Guardian Scholars program will invite you to participate.
- The program typically offers:
 - Personalized academic advising and counseling
 - Tutoring and educational workshops
 - Peer mentoring and leadership opportunities
 - Emergency financial aid and scholarships
 - Assistance with housing and basic needs
 - Internships and career development resources
 - Community-building events to foster belonging and support networks

- [NextUp](#): Available at California Community Colleges, NextUp provides additional support for foster youth up to age 26—including textbook grants, transportation help, meal vouchers, counseling, and housing/childcare assistance.
- [Extended Opportunity Programs and Services \(EOPS\)](#): EOPS offers academic and support counseling, financial aid, and other support services at California Community Colleges, California State Universities and University of California campuses.
- [California College Pathways](#) programs may offer peer advisors and personal counselors. They can provide academic advising, housing assistance, tutoring, mentoring, financial assistance, special accommodations for students with disabilities, counseling, social activities and many other resources. Visit the [California College Campus Listing](#) to search colleges for foster youth campus support programs.
- **Campus Foster Youth Liaisons**: Every community college campus has a foster youth liaison designated to help foster youth as part of the Foster Youth Success Initiative. These liaisons are dedicated professionals committed to doing all they can in helping current and former foster youth reach their goals.

Academic and Life Skills Supports

- **Tutoring and Academic Coaching**: Specialized support in study skills and time management, often coordinated through programs like Guardian Scholars.
- **Life Skills Development**: Workshops in personal finances, self-advocacy, and healthy relationships are frequently integrated into Guardian Scholars and similar programs, equipping foster youth for success beyond the classroom.
- **Mentoring and Peer Support**: Peer-driven networks and mentorships are a vital component of Guardian Scholars, helping students build confidence and resilience.

Housing and Basic Needs

- **Year-Round and Priority Housing**: Guardian Scholars Programs often coordinate or advocate for secure, stable year-round housing.
- **Emergency Funds and Food Pantries**: Access to emergency assistance is frequently facilitated through Guardian Scholars and other campus programs.
- **Housing Navigation**: Guardian Scholars staff often provide guidance through the application process, deposits, and lease understanding.

Resources

- [CalGrant/CA Dream Act](#) is available to students attending college in California and can cover tuition costs as well as other costs such as housing and books. Youth in foster care are given special consideration when applying for a CalGrant. Youth in foster care can qualify any time up to age 26 (other students must apply within one year of high school graduation), may have an extended deadline to apply, and can receive the grant for eight years rather than the usual four years. Students who are undocumented can submit a [California Dream Act Application](#).
- [Chafee Education Training Voucher \(ETV\)](#) is managed through an interagency agreement between the California Department of Social Services and the California Student Aid

Commission. Current and former foster youth who were in out-of-home placement between the ages of 16-18 may be eligible to receive up to \$5,000 for college.

- [California College Promise Grant](#), formerly known as the BOG Fee Waiver, the California College Promise Grant permits enrollment fees to be waived for eligible California residents.
- [Federal Pell Grant Program](#) provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate and certain postbaccalaureate students to promote access to postsecondary education. In order to apply for and receive the Pell Grant, you should start by submitting a [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\) form](#). You will have to fill out the FAFSA form every year you're in school to stay eligible for federal student aid.

How to Ask for Help

- If you are developing your educational goals or working to achieve your goals, ask your social worker, probation officer or other supportive adults (members of your CFT, your attorney, mentors, CASA, teachers, coaches, school counselors, etc.) what they can do assist you in achieving your goals:
 - Assistance applying for, or preparing to apply for, admission to college or to a vocational training program or other educational institution and in obtaining financial aid, where applicable
 - Identifying education/vocational training opportunities
 - Is there a specific program or major or occupation you are interested in studying?
 - Do you prefer to live in or near your current community?
 - Do you prefer to live on campus or commute to campus?
 - Do you plan to work while in school or training?
 - Do you need a flexible class schedule?
 - Do you prefer to attend a large or small school or training?
 - How do your financial aid options (e.g., federal grants and loans, scholarships) compare to the cost of tuition at the different schools or trainings?
 - Completing applications, including financial aid applications
 - Identifying support programs on campuses like foster youth liaisons at California Community College campuses or Guardian Scholars programs at California State University or University of California campuses