



BASIC NEEDS

Key Issues and Policy Recommendations for Supporting Youth Formerly in Foster Care

About Student Success Toolkits

The Student Success Toolkits from Trellis Strategies provide evidence-based recommendations for colleges and universities to improve student outcomes. The toolkits summarize the latest research in student success and outline practical steps for administrators and practitioners.

About Trellis Strategies

We are a strategic nonprofit research and consulting firm dedicated to advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce by delivering unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, from application through graduation. With over 40 years' experience serving higher education institutions and helping students navigate complex processes, we have the knowledge, insight, and experience to help organizations turn their data into action and action into results.

About the Author

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Supporting Youth Formerly in Foster Care (YFFC) in Higher Education

Youth formerly in foster care (YFFC) represent a particularly vulnerable population within higher education. These students face numerous challenges that can hinder their academic success, ranging from basic needs insecurity to lacking necessary support systems. There is a pressing need for institutions to implement targeted strategies to support YFFC students effectively.

69% of YFF students report **low or very low food security.**

But only **44%** of non-YFFC report similar levels of food insecurity.

69% of YFF students experience **housing insecurity,**

compared to only **41%** of non-YFFC students.



While **63%** of YFFC students **indicated their status on the FAFSA,** **ONLY 37%** of those received increased funding.

ONLY 39%

of YFFC students feel that their institution is aware of the financial challenges they face.



71% of YFFC students **did not know if their institution offered YFFC-specific aid programs,** and **63%** were unaware of state-specific aid programs.

Basic needs insecurity is a critical issue for YFFC students, with food and housing insecurity being prevalent concerns among the population.

According to Trellis Strategies, Fall 2023 Student Financial Wellness Survey¹, 69% of YFFC students report low or very low food security, significantly higher than the 44% of non-YFFC students who report similar levels of food insecurity.

This stark difference indicates that YFFC students are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, which can

negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being. The lack of consistent access to nutritious food can lead to physical and mental health issues, increased stress, and a diminished capacity to focus on studies.

Similarly, 69% of YFFC students experience housing insecurity, compared to 41% of non-YFFC students.

Housing insecurity includes challenges such as the inability to pay rent, frequent moves, or even homelessness. YFFC students face instability with housing at very unproportional

rates, leading to heightened stress and anxiety that can detract from their academic pursuits. Stable housing is a fundamental need, and without it, YFFC students may struggle to stay enrolled, let alone succeed academically. Transitional housing can be crucial for YFFC students, offering them a secure place to stay during academic breaks, mitigating the risk of homelessness and further instability.

These data points underscore the urgent need for institutions to prioritize addressing basic needs insecurity among YFFC students. Ensuring access to food and housing is not just about helping students survive; it's about giving them the foundation they need to thrive in higher education.

Another significant challenge for YFFC students is the unreliable communication between the students and the institutions that they attend leading to a lack of awareness about available support for students and about areas of need for institutions

Only 39% of YFFC students feel that their institution is aware of the financial challenges they face.

This low level of institutional awareness suggests that many colleges and universities may not fully understand the unique needs of YFFC students or may lack the mechanisms to identify and address these needs effectively. When institutions are not attuned to the specific challenges faced by YFFC students, these students can fall through the cracks, missing out on crucial support that could help them succeed.

On the other side, 71% of YFFC students did not know if their institution offered YFFC-specific aid programs, and 63% were unaware of state-specific aid programs.

This lack of awareness among students themselves means that even when support is available, it often goes unused. The complexity of navigating financial aid and support systems can be overwhelming, especially for students who lack a strong support network or who are unfamiliar with higher education processes. The gap in awareness highlights the need for better communication and outreach efforts from institutions. Ensuring that YFFC students are informed about the resources available to them is a crucial step in bridging the support gap.

While 63% of YFFC students indicated their status on the FAFSA, only 37% of those received increased funding.

This disparity suggests that simply identifying as a former foster youth on financial aid forms is not enough to guarantee the additional support these students need. The disconnect between FAFSA identification and the receipt of aid points to systemic issues in how financial support is distributed to YFFC students. Whether it's due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of coordination between federal and institutional aid programs, insufficient programs, or other factors, the current system is failing to provide adequate support to YFFC students.



Participation in Aid Programs

Among YFFC students who were aware of specific aid programs, participation rates were low. Of the students who knew about YFFC-specific state aid programs, only 54% participated. This low participation rate may be due to several factors, including complex application processes, lack of trust in the effectiveness of the programs, an unwillingness to or simply being overwhelmed by the demands of managing their education and personal lives without sufficient support.

These findings indicate that the existing support structures for YFFC students are not meeting their needs. Improving the effectiveness of these programs requires not just better implementation but also a more student-centered approach that considers the unique challenges faced by YFFC students.



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Key Recommendations



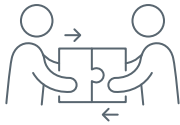
Designate YFFC Campus Liaisons

- > Create a funded and full-time former foster youth liaison position.
- > Required trauma informed training and preferably with lived experience in the foster system.
- > Ensure the liaison is equipped to provide tailored guidance on financial aid, on-campus resources, and navigating higher education.



Increase Awareness of Student Support

- > Host workshops that focus on available support programs for YFFC students.
- > Establish clear and effective communication channels between foster care programs and institutions to facilitate in identifying foster students and bridging the gap into higher education.
- > Regularly assess awareness levels among students and staff to ensure the effectiveness of outreach.



Create Accessible Support Opportunities

- > Develop tutoring, peer mentoring, and mental health support programs tailored to YFFC students.
- > Establish dedicated spaces on campus where YFFC students can access resources and connect with peers.
- > Ensure that support programs are user-friendly, with minimal bureaucratic barriers.
- > Gather feedback from YFFC students to continuously improve support services.



Provide Housing and Meal Assistance

- > Allocate specific housing spaces for YFFC students, during the academic calendar year and breaks.
- > Implement financial assistance programs for housing and meals, including subsidized housing and meal plans.
- > Offer emergency grants to YFFC students facing basic needs insecurity.
- > Review the effectiveness of housing and meal assistance programs regularly and make necessary adjustments.

Key Takeaways



Supporting youth formerly in foster care as they pursue higher education is a multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive approach. The data clearly shows that YFFC students face significant barriers related to basic needs insecurity, lack of awareness, and insufficient support. To help these students succeed, institutions must implement targeted strategies that address their specific needs. By designating campus liaisons, increasing awareness, creating accessible support programs, and providing housing and meal assistance, institutions can help YFFC students overcome these challenges and achieve their educational goals. Ensuring that YFFC students have the resources and support they need is essential for their academic and personal growth, ultimately contributing to their success in higher education and beyond.

References

- 1 Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., and Ashton, B. (2024). Student Financial Wellness Survey report: Fall 2023. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2023-semester-results/>

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