

OREGON STUDENT ASSISTANCE COMMISSION



OREGON FOSTER YOUTH AND HIGHER EDUCATION:

Creating New Opportunities

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Former Foster Youth and Higher Education: The Numbers

“Foster youth, those who have spent at least one year as a ward of the court after age 13, are among America’s most disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for higher education.”¹ In those few words the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) summed up a serious problem that Oregon faces when hundreds of its young citizens leave the state’s custody each year and make plans for their futures. Many of these young people are well-qualified for and want to enroll in college, but the costs can seem daunting. They also may lack the necessary information about how to prepare for college, how to choose a college, how to fill out college applications and financial aid forms.

The Oregon Student Assistance Commission (OSAC) and the Independent Living Program (ILP) administered by the Department of Human Services (DHS) have cooperatively created programs to meet the needs of foster teens by providing education about college attendance and financial aid to these students. The obstacles faced by foster youth who wish to attend college have been largely invisible as programs have been created over the years to assist other disadvantaged groups to gain access to college. The IHEP report cited above goes on to state:

Foster youth have yet to follow the path of low-income persons, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and students with disabilities in having their need for higher education recognized and having concentrated and effective efforts made on their behalf to ensure their access to higher education and their success in higher education.²

The efforts of DHS and OSAC have done much to enable foster youth and former foster youth to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to attend college. However, getting to college is only half the battle. Succeeding in college means persisting until one’s educational goals are met and this can often prove a daunting challenge for the former foster youth. The proposal set out here to add one staff member at OSAC to provide a personal centralized source of information, advice, encouragement and problem-solving for this group of students would go far toward creating a culture of success and increase the opportunities for persistence in college.

Oregon teens who are placed in foster care or who become teenagers while in foster care face many challenges to their emotional and intellectual growth that have been acknowledged by the state and, in recent years, remedial efforts have been initiated by legislators and other interested parties throughout the state. One particular area of interest has been the education of current and former foster youth. The life disruptions

caused by participation in the state's foster care system are exacerbated by transferring from school to school when moving to new foster care homes or when leaving the foster care system due to age without a fully formed plan for further education or employment.

In FY 2006, 401 Oregon youth "aged out" of the state foster care system. Each year, many former foster youth suddenly face all the difficulties of living as an independent adult without the normal supports of a caring family. These teens face a host of challenges since they may no longer rely on the state or foster parents to support and house them within the foster care system—spaces in foster homes are always needed by the state for new placements as soon as they become available. At the same time former foster youth often cannot return to the home of their natural parents due to the same dangers that precipitated their entrance into foster care.

Foster youth who want to attend college face additional challenges due to lack of knowledge about preparing for college, filing financial aid applications and accessing support services on campus. One of the best indicators of college participation by all teens is having one or both parents who attended college. However, the 2003 National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being showed that 56% of foster parents had a high school diploma or less³ and may not have had the knowledge and experience to guide foster youth toward college. The combination of disruptions in their lives and a lack of financial support has created a dismal picture of college participation by former foster youth.

In 2005, the Casey Family Foundation, a major contributor in the field of child welfare initiatives and research, released a study based on interviews of 479 former foster children who had been in foster care in Oregon and Washington. The mean age at the time of interview was 24.2 years. Among the findings of the study were the following:

- During their time in foster care, 65% of the interviewees had experienced seven or more school changes.⁴
- 84.8% of former foster children completed high school with either a diploma or GED; this is close to the completion rate of 87.3% for the general population of persons 18-29 years of age.⁵ However, the data showed that 28.5% of all high school completions for former foster youth were GEDs compared to 5% in the general population. The study states: "While having a GED credential is more beneficial than not completing high school, research data indicate that people who earn a high school diploma are more successful as adults—they are 1.7 times more likely to complete an associate's degree and 3.9 times more likely to complete a bachelor's degree. They also have higher incomes than those with a GED credential."⁶
- While 42.7 percent of former foster youth enrolled in one or more college-level classes after high school, only 2.7% of study participants age 25 and up had completed a bachelor's degree or higher. This compares to 27.5 percent of the general population.⁷

The 2005 IHEP report, cited above, provides a succinct summary of why foster youth face difficulties in higher education.

By definition, foster youth have been subjected to two traumatic experiences: the neglect or abuse that brought them to the attention of the authorities and the removal from their family. Some are traumatized a third time by the treatment they receive while in the foster care system. These traumatic experiences are the root of the unique barriers to higher education opportunities faced by foster youth. As a result of these traumas, foster youth often do not achieve the level of adult skill and maturity needed to live and act independently in the inherently adult world of higher education.⁸

Interviews with college students who are former foster youths have provided insight into the special challenges of this population. One California interviewee stated, “Foster kids worry a lot about things like shelter, food, transportation, medical and dental insurance, and where to go for the holidays. If this could be taken care of, we could focus more on our school work.” And another interviewee stated, “When I didn’t have a place to live or enough to eat, my astronomy class was not my top priority.”⁹

In 2007, OSAC administered a survey of Oregon former foster youth who were enrolled in college or had been enrolled to gather information about their concerns. When asked, “If you thought about dropping out of school or you did drop out, what were the reasons?” several important themes emerged. One student stated,

“Mostly when I felt uncomfortable I would get depressed and think of all the bad things that happened to me in life, just adding more stress. It is helpful to have someone to talk to alleviate the stress, someone who will listen and tell you that you can do anything you put your mind to. Yes your life has been hard but if you put all your focus on school you will be successful and happier in the long run. No one can take your education away from you and knowledge means power.”

Another student noted the cultural differences that come with campus life,

“Huge transition into an environment filled with people from ‘normal’ upper-middle-class families. Struggling at not having a real home base. Having to constantly advocate for yourself and repeatedly give/explain information to different university officials (financial aid, etc.) who are completely unfamiliar with the difficulties and limited resources available to foster care youth.”

Another stated the difficulty of getting health care,

“Not having health insurance was extremely difficult. I missed class for medical reasons...I went over to student health services and they couldn’t do anything for me. I also struggled with depression. Because I had no health insurance, I

had no means of treating it. Foster youth need health insurance while they are in school. Please.”

Financial difficulties were cited by over one third of the students surveyed. But many students indicated they were determined to continue their studies despite the difficulties. Some sample comments included,

“I have not thought seriously about dropping out of school. Sometimes I get stressed with the load but nothing that I don’t push through.”

“Dropping out of school is not an option even though it gets tough sometimes. I know in order to be successful I must continue my education.”

“Haven’t thought about dropping out of school.”

“Would never drop out.”

Many former foster youth are able to persist in college despite the difficulties that arise. A history of living in foster care does not preclude a long future of success. Many current and former foster youth show a remarkable resilience that allows them to be successful at their endeavors, despite all odds. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being cites the following:

The presence of risk factors does not guarantee a negative developmental outcome but increases the likelihood that a problem behavior may occur. The term “resiliency” is used to identify factors that research shows will enhance children’s ability to overcome life situations that place them at risk. Even in the face of overwhelming odds, it is possible for children to exhibit a remarkable degree of resilience.¹⁰

The results of the 2007 OSAC survey indicate a need for more centralized services for former foster youth who want to access and persist in postsecondary education. A 2007 review of the federal Chafee program by the National Foster Care Coalition noted,

There continues to be a great concern among communities about the well-being and success of youth leaving foster care, especially as it relates to postsecondary education readiness, access and retention success. Many states have invested funds in transition and education services...the Guardian Scholars Program (a campus based support program for former foster youth) model has spread to well over 20 campuses in California. Similar programs have been started in Texas, Indiana, Washington and Florida.¹¹

The report notes the success of “...individualized comprehensive supports for youth in postsecondary programs. These include mentoring services, care packages, leadership opportunities, internships, health insurance, housing, and the assurance that someone is available to talk or to help any time and every time it’s needed.”¹²

In recent years Oregon has enacted new laws to increase the chances of success for youth aging out of the foster care system, and the Department of Human Services and OSAC have increased efforts to educate caseworkers and foster youth about higher education opportunities and available funding. These efforts have helped dozens of former foster youth transition into college and find the financial resources to pay their way on campus. However, many more students could benefit from these programs if: 1) funding were available for all students who qualify, and 2) former foster youth had an advocate in the state who could assist them with the choosing college courses, applying for financial aid for all years of enrollment, serving as a liaison with campus officials, and also assisting with employment, housing and connecting with educational support services on campus.

Efforts to Increase Successful Education Outcomes

Over the years, the Oregon Legislative Assembly and the Governor's Office have created and passed legislation to encourage participation by former foster youth in postsecondary education and to alleviate the education disruptions associated with multiple school transfers.

- In 2001, HB 2431 was enacted to provide tuition assistance to Oregon foster youth who were wards of the court for 12 or more months between the ages of 16 and 21. This assistance could be used to pay for attendance at most public and private Oregon colleges. A General Fund appropriation of \$100,000 plus private donations administered by the Oregon Student Assistance Commission provided scholarships for 55 former foster youth totaling \$179,732. State support for this program has not been renewed since the 2001-03 biennium.
- In 2003, the Legislature passed SB 808 that required the Department of Human Services to create an independent living plan for all teens in foster care age 16 and over. The bill also recommended the creation of such a plan for 14- and 15-year-olds but made it optional for those youth. The new law required the independent living plan to address the child's needs and goals related to housing, physical and mental health, education, employment, community connections and supportive relationships.
- SB 1034 was enacted during the 2005 Legislative Session to further strengthen the goals of planning for the transition of foster youth to independent living. The bill augmented the wardship of the court for youth in the foster care system from age 18 to age 21 unless dismissed by the court prior to the youth's 21st birthday. Under the new law, dismissal by the court is contingent on a finding of adequate transition planning by DHS that includes adequate services to implement the plan, involvement by the youth in creating the plan and acquiring adequate long-term housing. Educational goals are also a consideration in the court's decisions regarding the adequacy of transition plans.
- The 2005 Legislative Session also passed HB 3075 to increase continuity in education for foster children in recognition of the disruption caused by

transferring among schools when a foster placement changes. HB 3075 allows a child to remain in the school attended prior to intake into the foster care system, if deemed appropriate by the court. It also requires the placing agency to provide transportation for the child if a placement is necessary outside the normal attendance area of the previous school, depending on the availability of funds for such transportation. Additionally, the bill requires transference of student records within ten days of enrollment from/to the new school. This provision eases the difficulty the new school might have in appropriately placing the child in a new classroom.

In addition to legislative efforts to increase the educational success of former foster youth, DHS and OSAC jointly administer the federally funded Chafee Education and Training Voucher program. This program is one of several programs created under the federal Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, providing states with funding to assist foster youth in the transition to independent living as adults. The table below shows the numbers and amounts of Chafee Education and Training Voucher awards that have been made since funding was received in 2003.

Number and Total Dollar Amount of Chafee Education and Training Voucher Funds Awarded to Former Foster Youth in Oregon 2003 through 2008		
Academic Year	Number of Student Receiving Awards	Total Amount of Awards
2003-04	16	\$67,841
2004-05	85	\$374,139
2005-06	136	\$550,222
2006-07	153	\$678,200
2007-08	198	\$861,752
2008-09 (to date)	230	\$861,230
Totals	571	\$3,393,384

OSAC also administers the ASPIRE program in 110+ Oregon high schools. The ASPIRE program matches trained community volunteers with high school students to provide one-on-one mentoring. ASPIRE advisors guide students through the process of applying for college, financial aid, and scholarships. These advisors also work closely with DHS ILP staff to ensure that foster youth received accurate information while in high school to make informed decisions about college opportunities. Additionally, OSAC has developed webpages and printed information about college participation and financial aid. ASPIRE also invites DHS ILP workers to the annual ASPIRE training conference and provides regional workshops for foster youth and their families. OSAC's specialized information may be found at http://www.aspireoregon.org/s_fosteryouth.html. The DHS ILP has also developed printed educational materials for students and participates in a variety of training programs to educate caseworkers about higher education options for the youth in their caseloads.

DHS and OSAC are working together to engage a wide range of postsecondary advocates in developing initiatives to improve college participation for foster youth. These partners include:

- Education Credit Management Association
- The Ford Family Foundation
- Oregon Association of State Financial Aid Administrators
- Oregon College Access Network
- Oregon Community College Student Association
- Oregon Community Foundation
- Oregon Independent College Association
- Oregon Indian Council on Postsecondary Education
- Oregon Student Association
- Oregon Youth Advisory Council
- Non-profit social service organizations around the state, e.g., Looking Glass Family and Youth Services

This workgroup has developed four major focus areas where additional efforts are needed to increase higher education access, retention and degree completion for former foster youths.

1. Increase visibility of the issue.
 - a. Gather and disseminate information about the difficulties former foster youth face when leaving the foster care system and choosing options for future education.
 - b. Encourage an ongoing dialogue with policy makers around the state to focus on the particular difficulties and potential solutions for the population of youths who age out of the state foster care system.
 - c. Welcome the Oregon Youth Advisory Council for Former Foster Youth to have a voice in this process.

2. Increase financial aid.
 - a. The Chafee Education and Training Voucher program will not be able to award all eligible students in the future. The funding shortfall will grow to \$700,000 in the 2009-11 biennium.
 - b. While most former foster youth are eligible for federal Pell Grants and the Oregon Opportunity Grant in addition to the more limited Chafee grants, the combined total from these programs will still not meet the cost of attendance at most Oregon colleges. The table below shows the average gaps in funding for foster youth who received Chafee Education and Training Voucher awards to attend college. The table shows average costs of attendance at the colleges the Chafee awardees chose for each year, by college sector. Average amounts of Pell grants, Oregon Opportunity Grants and Chafee awards are also shown. The remaining need column

indicates the cost of attendance minus the known gift aid received, on average, by Chafee awardees attending in each college sector.

Average Remaining Need for Chafee Awardees for 2003-2007 by College Sector						
<i>Note 1: Amounts shown below are averages for Chafee awardees only in each year and sector</i>						
<i>Note 2: Amounts of gift aid awarded to these students directly from colleges are not included here</i>						
Year	College Sector	Average Cost of College Attendance at Colleges Where Chafee Awardees Chose to Attend	Average Pell Award For Chafee Awardees	Average Oregon Opportunity Grant For Chafee Awardees	Average Chafee Award	Average Remaining Need
2003	Community Colleges	\$10,666	\$4,050	\$1,164	\$2,587	\$2,865
2004	Community Colleges	\$11,523	\$3,978	\$1,257	\$4,206	\$2,082
2005	Community Colleges	\$12,086	\$3,990	\$1,351	\$3,969	\$2,776
2006	Community Colleges	\$12,657	\$3,950	\$1,231	\$4,146	\$3,330
2007	Community Colleges	\$13,066	\$4,261	\$1,384	\$4,530	\$2,891
Oregon University System						
2003	Oregon University System	\$13,319	\$4,050	\$1,283	\$5,000	\$2,986
2004	Oregon University System	\$15,825	\$4,035	\$1,482	\$4,971	\$5,337
2005	Oregon University System	\$16,475	\$4,050	\$1,571	\$4,714	\$6,140
2006	Oregon University System	\$17,076	\$4,013	\$1,633	\$4,868	\$6,562
2007	Oregon University System	\$17,723	\$4,269	\$1,728	\$4,796	\$6,930
Independent not-for-profit colleges						
2003	Independent not-for-profit colleges	No Chafee awardees attended independent not-for-profit colleges in this year				
2004	Independent not-for-profit colleges	\$31,530	\$4,050	\$3,275	\$3,556	\$20,649
2005	Independent not-for-profit colleges	\$34,016	\$3,688	\$3,593	\$4,887	\$21,848
2006	Independent not-for-profit colleges	\$36,883	\$3,388	\$3,875	\$5,000	\$24,620
2007	Independent not-for-profit colleges	\$35,905	\$4,310	\$3,553	\$5,000	\$23,042

- c. Develop new donor support for the privately funded DREAM Scholarship for former foster youth.
 - d. Encourage colleges to increase funding of tuition waver programs for former foster youth.
 - e. The workgroup encourages a statewide effort to avoid adding student loans to financial aid packages for former foster youth, especially in the first two years of college. Since these students have little or no family support, the financial burden of student indebtedness after college would exacerbate the usual stresses associated with repaying student loans while trying to start a career, purchase a home and start a family.
3. Create an information bridge between K-12 and postsecondary education.
 - a. Develop an electronic mentoring system between high school foster youth and college staff members, former foster youth already in college or other caring adults by setting up a secure, monitored e-mail system through OSAC's existing technology. Pair mentors with high school students and encourage regular contact and support to further college aspirations. The e-mail system would provide a stable means of contact to those in foster care, as they often relocate from one foster home to another.
 - b. Expand the training that ASPIRE staff and volunteer mentors provide to DHS ILP caseworkers, foster parents and students. Training is currently

done in person, but electronic means should be added to provide podcasts, webinars, videos and other electronic means to disseminate the information to all corners of the state.

4. Increase College Retention and Completion

Develop the position of Foster Youth College Access and Retention Program Coordinator at OSAC to serve as an advocate for all foster youth in Oregon who are enrolled in college. This person would support and advocate for these students in the following ways:

- a. Serve as a centralized college counselor and advocate for former foster youth. Provide individual training and advice about financial aid, accessing campus resources, obtaining housing, employment, health care and the many other items that college students need to know but often don't know who to ask.
- b. Serve as a mentor for former foster youth who are enrolled in college and recruit and train additional mentors who have completed college and are working in fields of interest to FFY students.
- c. Train ASPIRE high school program staff, volunteer mentors and the DHS ILP staff regarding accurate information to high school students about college opportunities, career exploration programs, the college application process, financial aid programs, scholarships and information resources to assist foster youth in making decisions about college attendance. Make sure that all foster teens know who the Foster Youth College Access and Retention Program Coordinator is and have contact information.
- d. Instruct and assist college students to fill out and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and apply for all appropriate forms of financial aid and scholarships for each year they attend college. Help students interpret financial aid awards and become aware of the best financing options.
- e. Organize college visitation for groups of foster youth, work with individual students to choose a college appropriate to their interests and level of academic preparation.
- f. Train one or more existing campus staff to be foster youth specialists on each Oregon campus so they understand the particular difficulties that foster youth may face.
- g. Work with college financial aid officers to ensure that each former foster youth has been identified appropriately (usually as an independent student for financial aid purposes) and that the student has been considered for all appropriate federal, state and institutional financial aid programs.
- h. Work with campus counseling and advising departments, residence life, student services, tutoring, disability services, the campus employment office and health services staff to increase awareness of and assistance to foster youth.
- i. Provide ongoing advice and support for former foster youth while they are attending college. Encourage persistence until graduation and work with

appropriate community programs when issues of financial support, employment, housing, academic difficulty, personal and family difficulty or other issues that may interfere with academic progress are encountered.

The DHS/OSAC workgroup supports the above initiatives because each member knows from experience that current and former foster youth face daunting challenges in transitioning from state custody into the world of work or college. These youths hope for and dream about overcoming the experiences that brought about their status as wards of the state. Implementation of the initiatives outlined above would provide the additional support they need to participate in college, gain high-level skills for employment and succeed in their adult lives. The costs of implementation are minimal compared to the costs of watching young lives falter when doors appear to be closed. These initiatives are about opening doors, providing increased opportunity for young people who are already knocking—and hoping.

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