

# Getting foster youth through college will take structured support, study concludes

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The college graduation rate for students who have lived in foster care is 3 percent, among the lowest of any demographic group in the country. And this rate is unlikely to improve unless community colleges institute formal programs to assist foster youth both financially and academically, concludes a new study by researchers at University of the Pacific.

The findings will be presented during the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago on Sunday, April 19.

"Informal programs are less likely to work since foster youth lack guidance and have learned to rely on structured institutional programs," said study co-author Melinda Westland, a graduate student at University of the Pacific's Gladys L. Benerd School of Education.

"Simply having a dedicated person whom foster youth can go to and ask questions—something many of these young people have never had—could really make a difference to their college success," she added.

To better understand the challenges facing former foster kids in college, Westland and co-researcher Ronald Hallett, an associate professor of education at University of the Pacific, examined the experiences of seven foster youth over a two-and-a-half semester journey through a California [community college](#).

California has the nation's largest population of children in foster care:

more than 55,000. The number is about half what it was in 2000, meaning that thousands of former California foster youth are now college-age. Nationally, an estimated 419,000 children and youth are in foster care.

The study is among the few to focus on the experience of foster youth in college. This population is hard to identify because the students, fearing social stigma, rarely disclose their [foster-care](#) history on campus.

Three factors stood out during the study: Because their foster families had not owned or provided access to computers, most of the foster youth had only basic or even non-existent computer skills when they entered college.

Money was a problem. While most college students get at least some financial support from their families—studies show parents provide an average of \$2,200 a year to children up to age 34—foster youth often have no outside financial help.

And although the foster youth saw earning a four-year degree as a pathway to future stability, they were confused about the process of transferring from a community college.

The University of the Pacific researchers concluded that foster youth who enroll in community [college](#) need additional [financial support](#), structured campus programming, and psychosocial support.

Students in the study who became aware of campus resources, such as a tutoring center, took advantage of those resources and did better in their classes.

"A structured support program could help foster youth find and use resources already available to students," Hallett said. "That alone could

make a significant difference."

A student identified as Amanda summed up the views of most participants in the study: "I wish I had someone who cared about my future as much as I did, so they could help me along that path."

Provided by University of the Pacific

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