



## Higher Education Reform

### Incorporating the Needs of Foster Youth

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## Summary

The Higher Education Act is not the silver bullet for improving postsecondary educational outcomes for foster care youth, but it is a potential trigger for other needed reforms and represents an opportunity for the federal government to demonstrate leadership in helping a population that has been neglected for too long.

The modest changes to the Higher Education Act recommended in this paper will begin to respond to the many barriers to a healthy and successful life faced by youth in the foster care system. Addressing the needs of this vulnerable population requires a systemic approach and the combined leadership of local, state, tribal, and federal governments, of community-based organizations, and of philanthropic organizations.



## Higher Education Reform: Incorporating the Needs of Foster Youth

The rapidly approaching reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) presents federal lawmakers with the opportunity to demonstrate leadership in improving the economic and academic outcomes of foster care youth—some of this country’s most forgotten people. The states protect these young people from abuse and neglect but do not have strong systems for helping to prepare them for productive lives as adults, which more than ever requires postsecondary education.

In this period of budget deficits, lawmakers can begin the process of large-scale improvements with incremental, low-cost, and widely supported changes that expand foster youth’s access to financial aid and provide them with high-quality support services while expanding understanding of foster care youth and their barriers to success.

### Youth in Care: Having Access to the Dream

The 20,000 teens per year who are “emancipated” from—or “age out” of—the foster care system at age 18 (21 in some states) have limitless potential. A strong majority — 70 percent — of teens in the foster care system have a desire to attend college.<sup>i</sup> A recent study of 1500 foster care youth showed that nearly half attended some college.<sup>ii</sup>

But success is hard won and the consequences of not completing a postsecondary education are severe. Statistically, foster care alumni are more likely than the general population to face such challenges as homelessness, incarceration, and lower lifetime earning potential, especially without a college degree or vocational specialty.<sup>iii</sup>



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## **Too Proud to Beg, Too Strong to Fail:** Phu Nguyen

Phu Nguyen's journey from foster care to higher education began in a village in Vietnam. As a young boy he spent much of his time with his grandparents rather than his parents. At 14, Nguyen moved with his family to the United States, leaving his beloved grandparents behind.

When his father's physical abuse became unbearable, Nguyen walked to a phone booth and called 911, hoping the police would take him to jail where he would be safe. He had never heard of Child Protective Services.

Foster care opened a new world to Nguyen. After six months in a temporary shelter, he moved in with his foster father. Unlike most youth in foster care, he was able to remain in his foster home beyond his 18th birthday. When he left to attend San Jose State University, he became one of the small minority of foster care alumni to attend a four-year college.

His college years weren't easy for this intensely proud man. Because he had nowhere to go and was too proud to request assistance, he spent his first Christmas break from college sleeping in his Volkswagen. To stay in school Nguyen at times had to accept money from friends.

When he graduated from San Jose State in 2000, Nguyen became part of an even smaller number of foster care alumni with college degrees. And he didn't stop with an undergraduate degree. Nguyen went on to earn a master's degree in social work from the University of Michigan in 2001.

Today Phu Nguyen is a social worker in the San Jose area.

According to a study of foster care children in Washington state, a child who enters foster care is likely to have poorer academic outcomes than children not in foster care, even after controlling for a variety of factors such as poverty.

These youth in foster care:

- Are less likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes (15 percent vs. 32 percent) even when they have similar test scores and grades as non-foster care youth.
- Are significantly underrepresented in postsecondary programs.
- Are more than twice as likely as non-foster care youth (37 percent vs. 16 percent) to have dropped out of high school.<sup>iv</sup>

Still, very little is actually known about the postsecondary experience of foster care youth because too often comparable data are not collected. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) administered by the Department of Health and Human Services is the system by which states collect and report basic data about young people in their foster care and adoption programs. Unfortunately, AFCARS neither collects nor reports information about changes in young people's educational status that may occur during their participation in the state's child welfare system.

The absence of sound data and information about foster care youth prevent advocates, analysts, and policy makers from systematically serving one of this country's most ignored populations. Many alumni of foster care are struggling to keep their college dream alive.

It does not have to be this way. Youth in foster care are strong and resilient, and many have overcome long odds to achieve great success in spite of a broken system. When supported with permanent homes, fewer placements, and additional comprehensive services, foster care youth graduate from high school and postsecondary education institutions at significantly higher rates. HEA cannot fix the entire foster care system but it can be changed to begin to address the postsecondary needs of foster care youth and to serve as a call for systemic reforms.



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**Seizing Opportunities, Keeping Focused:** Christina (Christi) Crow

Christi Crow is from the small logging community of Stevenson, Washington. She is currently enrolled in her third year of studies at Clark College.

She was placed in foster care in the fourth grade. Like many children in foster care, Christi had to move around quite a bit growing up. Luckily, she was able to stay with her last family for five years—giving her time to adjust to high school, make friends, and become a part of the Stevenson community.

Christi thrived in that stable and supportive setting. In high school she was actively involved in student government, sports, theatre, and church. And when Stevenson High was selected for the Washington State Achievers Program (sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Washington State Education Foundation), Christi got an even stronger chance to fulfill her educational dream of graduating from high school and going to college.

Today she is an Achievers Scholar and plans to attend the University of Oregon next year. She also works part time at the Skamania Lodge to help cover the cost of attending college.

Since enrolling in college, Christi has had her share of ups and downs. Through it all she has managed to stay focused on her academic career, and she is making great strides toward completing her education.

## Reauthorization of HEA: Reaching Higher for Foster Care Youth

To address the myriad obstacles to a healthy and successful life faced by youth emancipated from the foster care system, government agencies at the local, state, tribal, and federal levels must play a more active role. Too frequently, government support for youth in, and aging out of, the foster care system is fragmented, inadequate, or nonexistent.

The Higher Education Act provides a timely opportunity for the federal government to begin to take action. The primary federal source for financial aid for postsecondary education, HEA, is expected to be “reauthorized” before the 109th Congress.

HEA can be an instrument for helping foster care youth access degree programs at both two- and four-year institutions. After all, proprietary (or trade) schools enroll 4 percent of all postsecondary students, and public community colleges enroll 37 percent of all students. While these youth require additional support services to succeed, it is critical that two- and four-year degree programs are advanced as an option for foster care youth. In short, HEA can help to improve outcomes for foster care youth.

### Recommendations for the Reauthorization of HEA

Recommendations for the reauthorization of HEA were designed to improve the academic and economic outcomes of foster care youth without creating new programs or increasing the authorization amount of HEA. The recommendations are also intended to create momentum for further reforms at the local, state, tribal, and federal levels that will improve the economic, health, and academic outcomes of foster care youth. Although modest, the three recommendations would enhance understanding about the obstacles to postsecondary education success facing foster care youth, and increase their access to federal financial aid and programs designed to prepare disadvantaged youth for college.



Too frequently, government support for youth in, and aging out of, the foster care system is fragmented, inadequate, or nonexistent.

**Recommendation 1: Require the U.S. General Accounting Office to study how to expand the concept of “ability to benefit” to increase the number of deserving foster care youth who have access to a higher education.**

Because of their tumultuous lives and special needs, a large number of youth in foster care fail to earn a high school diploma. Many of these youth, however, could benefit from receiving some form of postsecondary education if given the resources and ability to access financial aid.

Students without a high school diploma are not necessarily excluded from access to financial aid to attend postsecondary institutions. HEA provides an alternative route to eligibility for financial aid. Dropouts are eligible if they can achieve a score specified by the U.S. Secretary of Education on an independently administered exam demonstrating that they can benefit from the education or training being offered.<sup>v</sup>

The reauthorization of HEA should require the U.S. General Accounting Office to study how to expand this concept of “ability to benefit” to increase the number of deserving foster care youth who have access to a higher education. For example, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) has recommended that high school dropouts who have completed at least six units of college courses applicable toward a degree or certificate and who have a grade average of “C” or better be deemed to have the ability to benefit from higher education and thus have access to financial aid. NASFAA notes that recent research indicates “that students who do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent but who pass at least six units of college courses have grades and retention rates that are equal to or higher than students with high school diplomas.”<sup>vi</sup>

Expanding access in this or other ways would be of particular use to youth aging out of the foster care system as they struggle to develop the skills that will enable them to earn a living wage.

**Recommendation 2: Require the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance to provide recommendations for expanding access to foster care youth to federal financial aid.**

Section 490C of HEA established the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, which, among other responsibilities, is directed to assess the adequacy of and provide recommendation for improving current methods for disseminating information about student financial aid programs, and to provide recommendations for the modernization of student financial aid systems and delivery processes.

Foster care youth would benefit greatly if these “special analyses and activities” of the Advisory Committee addressed their special needs and circumstances. For example, the Advisory Committee might look into how more foster care youth can be encouraged to apply for financial aid and how the application process could be streamlined.

Another area that the Advisory Committee might look into is the potential barrier to application of financial aid for “informal” foster care youth—those who are not formally part of the foster care system but live with caregivers other than their birth parents (i.e., in “kinship care”). These youth may be failing to apply for federal financial aid because the application does not have a category for recognizing their special circumstances and includes other categories (e.g., “ward of the state”) that could create confusion. Therefore, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) should specifically state that “unusual circumstances not shown on this form” includes kinship care as it does in the case of “loss of employment.” This modification in the FAFSA form would make it easier for foster care youth in kinship care to demonstrate that they meet the special circumstances test for financial aid.

**Recommendation 3: Encourage TRIO and GEAR UP to make foster care youth a priority.**

HEA funds outreach programs to prepare disconnected youth for postsecondary education. For example, two federal TRIO programs are educational opportunity outreach programs designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress through the “academic pipeline.”<sup>vii</sup> Talent Search and Upward Bound programs identify, motivate, and support students as they complete secondary school and undertake a program of postsecondary education. Both programs provide a spectrum of services, including assistance in secondary school reentry, entry to GED programs, assistance in completing college admission and financial aid applications, personal and career counseling, instruction, summer housing, and academic tutorials.<sup>viii</sup>

GEAR UP is a program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. It provides grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. Funds are also used to provide college scholarships to low-income students.<sup>ix</sup>

Both TRIO and GEAR UP target disadvantaged students and are extremely important in terms of identifying youth for college awareness opportunities, but neither program specifically emphasizes foster care youth as a population that requires special attention. The reauthorization of HEA should address this issue by identifying services to foster care youth as a “permissible service” in these programs.

Foster care youth deserve to receive special attention because they tend to move frequently from school to school, have difficulty learning in a traditional classroom setting, and come from impoverished and broken homes. All these factors make foster care youth very difficult—but especially important—to serve.



**Talent Search and Upward Bound programs identify, motivate, and support students as they complete secondary school and undertake a program of postsecondary education.**



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## Report Dissemination

Casey Family Programs encourages the widest distribution possible of the *Higher Education Reform: Incorporating the Needs of Foster Youth* report in the order to inform the broad public about the unique needs and challenges faced by current and former foster care youth in obtaining a higher education. Two options are offered to facilitate report distribution nationwide.

- Download the report in an electronic PDF document from our website at [www.casey.org](http://www.casey.org)
- To order printed copies of the report, contact our Washington, D.C., office at 202.467.4441





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