



Fostering Student Success: Building a Support Program for Students from Foster Care

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Research Methodology
- II. Executive Summary
- III. Building a Support Structure
- IV. Providing Services
- V. Outside Resources

**RESEARCH
ASSOCIATE**
Keely Bielat

**RESEARCH
DIRECTOR**
Jennifer Yarrish

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge:

Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:

- *How are key support services for foster youth structured?*
- *What resources are available to help foster youth to transition to life at the university (e.g., dedicated advisor, support group, etc.)?*
- *How do other universities assist foster youth in facing specific challenges, including applying for admission and financial aid, buying textbooks and other peripherals, and finding a place to live during semester breaks?*

Project Sources:

- Advisory Board’s internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries
- The Chronicle of Higher Education <http://chronicle.com>
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) <http://nces.ed.gov/>
- Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education (6th Edition)
- *Supporting Success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care*, Casey Family Programs (2008)
- *It’s My Life: Financial Aid – A Resource for Child Welfare Professionals*, Casey Family Programs (2006)

Research Parameters:

- Per the requesting member’s guidelines, the Council targeted its outreach to large public universities; however, University F, a best-in-class institution in terms of providing support for foster youth, was also included. Additionally, the Council spoke with contacts at a community college in the California Community Colleges system, which has made a system-wide commitment to supporting foster youth.
- The state of California has approximately 25 percent of all foster youth in the United States, resulting in earlier development of programs and support for foster youth in higher education in California and the west than in other parts of the country. Consequently, the majority of the universities interviewed by the Council are located in western states.
- In addition to contacts at the universities in the table on the following page, the Council also spoke with representatives from the California State University system and Casey Family Programs.

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief			
Institution	Location	Enrollment (Total / Undergraduate)	Classification
University A	West Coast: Midsize city	37,130 / 31,750	Public: Master's university
University B	Midwest: Small city	19,849 / 16,694	Public: Doctoral research university
University C	West: Small city	31,796 / 26,348	Public: Research university (very high research activity)
University D	Midwest: Small city	24,433 / 19,718	Public: Research university (high research activity)
College E	West Coast: Large city	46,411 (all undergraduate)	Public: Community college
University F	West Coast: Large city	7,529 / 4,253	Private: Master's university
California State University System	West Coast	n/a	n/a
Casey Family Programs	West Coast	n/a	n/a

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Observations:

- ❖ **To ensure student success, it is necessary to provide financial, academic, and emotional/social support.** Essential services include a dedicated advisor in financial aid; specialized academic advising; and drop-in centers for foster youth to support them during times of need.
- ❖ **A full-time designated point person is vital for the success of foster youth at the university.** In addition to providing a dependable resource for students, the point person can publicize the program within the university, recruiting lead contacts in key offices across campus (e.g., financial aid, counseling center, academic advising, etc.).
- ❖ **Build an advisory committee with contacts across campus, institutionalizing the university's commitment to foster youth.** This committee should meet regularly, particularly in the program's early stages, and should include an opportunity for contacts across campus to provide feedback on programmatic decisions.
- ❖ **The majority of foster youth support programs are housed in student affairs.** Contacts note that non-academic support is often the most important piece of helping students to succeed in higher education. However, housing the endeavor in academic affairs can help the program to develop, at least initially, without having to “compete” for resources against pre-existing student affairs programs.
- ❖ **Solicit feedback from students to inform programming.** Contacts stress the importance of opinions from foster youth currently enrolled at the university in determining which services are most important to offer from the outset.
- ❖ **Whether or not the university is able to provide a comprehensive scholarship for students aging out of foster care, financial advising is essential.** At institutions that do not provide a scholarship for foster youth, students still have access to a dedicated advisor in financial aid who seeks out scholarship and grant opportunities for foster youth.
- ❖ **All four-year institutions offer year-round, on-campus housing for foster youth.** Many foster youth do not have permanent homes; therefore, this population should receive priority housing and be allowed to remain in residence halls even during university breaks. To accommodate students in the dorms during breaks, many institutions cluster students in one residence hall to minimize operational costs.
- ❖ **It is important to integrate foster youth into the university community and not offer too many siloed activities.** Contacts note that offering many dedicated services specifically for foster youth (e.g., specialized orientation, cohorting in residence halls, etc.) makes this population feel less engaged with the university as a whole and can lead to decreased retention.

III. BUILDING A SUPPORT STRUCTURE

Recommendation 1: Appoint a point person to support and advocate for foster youth within the university community.

In order to support the unique needs of foster youth at the university, contacts stress the importance of appointing a single point person to whom students can turn for any problem. All universities contacted by the Council have at least one dedicated full-time staff member per twenty foster youth; however, contacts state that as soon as a university decides to offer services to students from foster care, this position is necessary regardless of the number of students.

Below are important qualifications and key duties of an individual in the position.

Qualifications	Duties
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Familiarity with the needs of foster youth• Willingness and ability to advocate for support throughout the university community• Knowledge of resources available within the university; ability to network effectively• Listening skills; availability to interact with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruiting foster youth to apply to the program• Providing support and assisting students on a day-to-day basis• Networking within the university and with outside advocates• Marketing the program to community partners• Fundraising (in some cases)

As programs have developed and the number of students has increased, several universities have added additional staff to support the program director. Such staff may include:

- Assistant coordinator (*University A, University B*): focuses primarily on daily needs of students, leaving the director free to network and develop the program administratively
- Campus coach (*University D*): Like the program coordinator, is available to students daily, helping them to work through issues and identifying resources on campus

Recommendation 2: Create an advisory committee by identifying contacts in key offices across campus.

Forming an advisory committee gives foster youth advocates the opportunity to educate key parties across the university about foster youth, as well as providing a forum in which to address problems as they arise. Participants in the committee must be trained in the general workings of the foster care system, unique needs and challenges of foster youth, and how to respond to common issues in dealing with this population.

In addition to the point person for foster youth, a successful advisory committee generally includes representatives from the following offices:

- ❖ Financial aid
- ❖ Housing
- ❖ Registrar
- ❖ Academic advising
- ❖ Counseling center
- ❖ Learning center

“[Creating a successful program] is really about working collaboratively within the university structure. As the director of this program, I network and work very closely with the director of housing, the director of financial aid, the director of academic advising, because it really takes a lot of people to make a program like this successful for foster youth. There’s no way you can do it on your own.”

- Council Interview

III. BUILDING A SUPPORT STRUCTURE

Recommendation 3: Reach out to the community to obtain buy-in and leverage pre-existing resources for foster youth.

All contacts mentioned community participation as a vital component of a successful program. In cases where there is not buy-in from upper university administration, an external “champion” for the cause of foster youth from within the community can also galvanize the university’s upper echelons into action. In addition to several notable national foundations that provide support for foster youth (e.g., Casey Family Programs, Lumina Foundation, etc.), there are many statewide and regional foundations whose resources can be leveraged to provide support not available within the university. *Insights from Casey Family Programs may be found on page 15.*

Recommendation 4: Programming should be informed by input from former foster youth currently at the university.

While services offered should be based around the university’s pre-existing strengths, current foster students should also have a voice in determining what support services are most vital to provide from the program’s inception. Potential forums for soliciting student feedback include (in order of increasing complexity):

Reception	Focus Group	Student Advisory Board
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite all former foster youth for a reception, soliciting ideas from students in an informal environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather former foster youth in an intensive session to solicit suggestions for programmatic offerings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a committee that meets throughout the year in order to obtain ongoing feedback about programming from students

Recommendation 5: Determine whether the program will include a competitive scholarship in order to inform program structure.

The majority of programs profiled include a competitive scholarship component; in these cases, the goal is generally to select students who would likely not be able to graduate without the aid of a scholarship and the associated services. Funding a scholarship necessitates the recruitment of community partners, either individual donors or foundations that serve foster youth. In any case, all universities provide open access to program support services for foster youth on campus that are not formally linked with the program, regardless of scholarship status.

Spotlight on University B

With the help of internal champions (namely, the dean of students), the Guardian Scholars program at **University B** secured a dedicated development officer within the university’s foundation. With the aid of this officer and university administration, program staff created a three-pronged sustainability plan in 2006, including:

- Soliciting funding for programming events from local foundations in the local community
- Funding the program’s operating expenses through accounts for the program within the university foundation into which individuals and organizations can donate
- Founding an endowment fund for the program’s future operating expenses

Although the program is entirely funded through outside sources, the university has provided office space and supplies.

III. BUILDING A SUPPORT STRUCTURE

Recommendation 6: Identify and recruit students for the program by partnering with existing state and local organizations and public schools.

A strong partnership with the state and local child welfare structure is key in recruiting foster youth to campus. Several universities network with organizations in the community that are involved with foster care, ensuring that these entities are aware of university resources and even promoting the support program directly to case workers. Additionally, contacts note the importance of connecting with local school districts, specifically with high school guidance counselors, in order to promote the program to students on a personal level.

“One of the biggest challenges of this experience is really the transition. These kids are leaving the foster care system and entering the system of higher education...You can’t go into the business of helping these young people without accepting that you are really partnering with this very big [foster care] system that’s not perfect.”

- Council Interview

The following list includes various resources to identify students as foster youth, both before and after matriculation at the university.

Pre-Matriculation:

- Foster care system
- Public K-12 system
- Community organizations that work with foster youth

Post-Matriculation:

- FAFSA database (the form includes a question about whether the student is a ward of the state)
- Financial aid office data on which students have Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funding

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Financial Support

When building a program to support former foster youth, it is vital to provide basic services (i.e., housing, financial assistance) before considering other programmatic offerings. Although the goal of support programs is ultimately to assist former foster youth in obtaining a degree, contacts emphasize that students must feel secure that their fundamental needs are being met before they can devote themselves to the academic aspects of life at the university. However, it is important to note that this support must include not only actual financial aid, but also resources devoted to helping students understand financial options and provisions for non-academic expenses.

“Many programs start as academically-based, but you will quickly learn that it’s all the other stuff that gets in the way....If students walk in and they don’t have food in their belly, guess what? They’re not studying for their chemistry test. If a student walks in and doesn’t know where they’re going to sleep that night, they’re not writing their English paper.”
 - Council Interview

An Overview of Financial Support Services

	Designated Liaison in Financial Aid Office	University Scholarship	Year-Round Housing On-Campus	Peripheral Expenses (textbooks, etc.)
University A	✓	✓	✓	✓
University B	✓	✗	✓	✗ ⁺
University C	✓	✓	✓	✓
University D	✓	✓	✓	✗ ⁺
College E	✓	✗	✗*	✗
University F	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: ✓ = offers service; ✗ = does not offer

* Because College E does not have residence halls, the institution is not able to provide year-round housing to former foster youth; however, the College’s point person has partnered with local Transitional Housing and Independent Living Programs (see details below).

+ Although University B’s program does not include a scholarship component, program staff solicit donations from community agencies for individual students’ peripheral expenses as needed. While University D did not have funds for peripheral expenses in the program’s first year, contacts state that this is a priority as the program grows.

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Elaboration of Financial Support Services (continued from table)

- **Designated liaison in financial aid office:** Whether or not the support program includes a scholarship component, the university must work with foster youth to ensure that they understand their financial requirements and options. Contacts at all institutions note the importance of having a designated contact in financial aid who is familiar with the unique needs of foster youth. The designated contact must be available to answer students' questions and identify scholarship and grant opportunities, also educating students about funding sources and delivery process. Orientation programming for students should include a session on financial aid with this contact, focusing on various aspects of financial literacy (e.g., grants vs. loans, credit cards, etc.).

Spotlight on University A

In addition to having access to a designated liaison in the financial aid office, students in the Guardian Scholars program at **University A** are presented with a variety of activities designed to increase financial literacy. The program's summer bridge session includes a workshop on applying for financial aid, and during the academic year, the university-affiliated federal credit union provides workshops on budgeting, loans, credit cards, and other financial matters.

- **University scholarship:** Although the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program combined with further state and federal financial aid generally cover the majority of expenses, several universities have committed to funding the remainder of expenses for former foster youth, including annual fees, textbooks and supplies, and any other peripheral expenses. Because the programs at University A, University C, University D, and University F include a scholarship component, admission to these programs is competitive; however, all former foster youth at these universities have access to support services, regardless of their scholarship status.
- **Year-round housing:** The decision to offer year-round housing on campus to students requires buy-in from upper university administration and can therefore be logistically challenging; however, contacts highlight the provision of housing as essential to the creation of an effective support program. Ideally, students would be allotted space in a specific residence hall when other halls are closed during semester breaks, guaranteeing housing at times of the year when other students are able to return home. However, if housing is not available on campus, some contacts report success in partnering with Independent Living Programs (ILPs) in the community.

"We know if we're dealing with [homeless students], right away we have a serious retention issue. That person that's homeless at that age is much less likely to stay in school. They're going to deal with the immediate issue in front of them, which is basic survival."

- Council Interview

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Year-Round On-Campus Housing

- **University A:** Guardian Scholars are guaranteed on-campus housing throughout the duration of their time at the university, beginning the summer before their first academic year. Students live in any of five designated residence halls during the semester, moving between buildings between semesters to accommodate maintenance needs and building shutdowns.
- **University D:** For foster youth remaining on campus between semesters and during university breaks (e.g., Thanksgiving, winter break), the university pays the daily housing fee assessed to all students who remain in the residence halls. Program staff also work with students to provide meals when university dining halls are closed.

Assisting in Obtaining Housing Off-Campus

- **University B:** Although the university provides on-campus housing for its Guardian Scholars, the program's affiliated community colleges are not able to do so. Instead, program staff work with Indiana's Independent Living Program (ILP) to help students secure housing with ETV grant funding, ensuring that students know what to look for in terms of housing.
 - **College E:** Because the College does not have any affiliated residence halls, program staff works strategically with the city's Transitional Housing Program (THP+). Through THP+, students have access to short-term emergency housing assistance, as well as resources to find affordable, longer-term housing.
- **Funding peripheral expenses:** Peripheral expenses may include textbooks, health insurance, school supplies, and even meals when the university's dining halls are closed between semesters. Particularly if there is no institutional scholarship, foster youth may struggle to cover these expenses, which are generally not included in financial aid packages. Consequently, several universities rely on previously established partnerships with community partners to solicit funds for struggling students on a case-by-case basis, obtaining funds to supplement available financial aid and grant funding. Contacts also recommend promoting the cause of foster youth to current donors, who might be willing to fund scholarships for students and/or cover peripheral expenses.

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Academic Support

The academic needs of students who have aged out of the foster system are likely differ from those of the majority of students at the university, as foster youth may have experienced disconnect in their previous education. Consequently, it is important to ensure that students are prepared for the courses they select and have access to a high degree of personalized academic advising. Summer bridge programs, while challenging to implement from a logistic perspective, may be highly effective helping students to make the transition from the foster care system to higher education, which contacts identify as a primary challenge for foster youth.

“We realized very quickly in doing the research that it wasn’t just going to be about scholarship funding, and that, while that would be a huge help for these students, it wasn’t going to be a magic bullet—that covering their educational expenses wasn’t necessarily going to be everything they needed to get from Day 1 to graduation.”

- Council Interview

An Overview of Academic Support Services			
	Designated Academic Advisor	Tutoring	Summer Bridge Program
University A	✓	✓	✓
University B	✓	✓	✗
University C	✓	✓	✗
University D	✓	✓	✗
College E	✓	✓	✓
University F	✓	✓	✗

Note: ✓ = offers service; ✗ = does not offer

- **Designated academic advisor:** While most universities automatically assign incoming students an advisor for academic concerns, foster youth may feel more comfortable discussing academics with a designated contact familiar with their backgrounds and challenges. Additionally, appointing a specific advisor also allows for a proactive partnership between the program director and the advising office.

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Elaboration of Academic Support Services (continued from table)

- **Tutoring:** Because foster youth tend to move frequently, some students may require remedial attention when they arrive at the university. Students may initially be hesitant to seek tutoring in the university learning center because of confidence issues; however, contacts caution against replicating services already available in the university community. Therefore, an effort should be made to increase student confidence through counseling and transitional programs, helping foster youth to feel comfortable in the university community and to take advantage of available academic resources.

Spotlight on University A

University A provides two unique services to its Guardian Scholars, helping to ensure students' academic success:

- *Priority class registration:* Working closely with dedicated academic advisors, Scholars are eligible to register for classes before the majority of the student body, ensuring that these students have access to the classes they need to graduate.
- *Mid-semester check in:* Each semester, the program coordinator sends out emails to all professors who teach Scholars, soliciting a brief progress report and connecting students with academic resources accordingly.

- **Summer bridge program:** A summer bridge program offers foster youth an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the university and form connections with other students while catching up on academic requirements. Because many foster youth may reach the age of 18 before the start of the academic year, summer bridge programs can also provide a much-needed place to live, also affording students a chance to ensure that they are ready for college, both emotionally and academically.

Summer Programming for Foster Youth	
University A	College E
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Incoming first-year Guardian Scholars are required to attend the summer bridge program ▪ Students take six units of academic credit, including a University 100 course as well as either remedial math/English or general education requirements ▪ Programming includes a Guardian Scholars program orientation, mandatory for all incoming participants (including transfers); sessions include information on academic requirements, applying for financial aid, and career mapping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The College offers an annual summer academy for 25-30 high school juniors and seniors who are interested in continuing to college; students are recruited through the local school district ▪ The academy focuses on expectation-setting and skill-building, assessment of students to determine areas of strength and weakness, and assistance with college and financial aid applications ▪ Structured mentoring support and familiarity with the college campus assist students in transitioning to college; the academy also provides a cohort for foster youth

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Emotional and Social Support

Although the ultimate goal of support programs for foster youth is to help students succeed and graduate from the institution, it is impossible to ensure academic success without emotional and social resources. Support programs can provide a family-like network for foster youth, providing students with networking opportunities and a community on which to rely for help.

“It definitely requires some flexibility, and I think higher ed institutions, like a lot of institutions, aren’t always comfortable with that. They really like to look at each student the same—every student has the same opportunities and access, which I absolutely respect, but I think in a program like this you’re acknowledging from the beginning that we have a unique population here.

- Council Interview

An Overview of Emotional and Social Support Services				
	Drop-In Center	Foster Youth Support Network	Counseling Services	Mentoring
University A	✓	✗	✓	✓
University B	✓	✗	✓	✓
University C	✗*	✓	✓	✓
University D	✗*	✓	✓	✓
College E	✓	✗	✓	✗ ⁺
University F	✓	✗	✓	✓

Note: ✓ = offers service; ✗ = does not offer

* Although the programs at University C and University E did not have access to a drop-in center in the first year, this is a priority for the next year of programming.

⁺ College E piloted a peer mentoring program for foster youth several years ago; the program was unsuccessful because of scheduling and commitment difficulties, which contacts posit could be a challenge unique to students at community colleges.

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

Elaboration of Academic Support Services (continued from table)

- **Drop-in center:** Having a space designated for the program provides foster youth with a “home” within the university that they can spend free time in, allowing for the creation of a family-like network. The point person should also be available as a resource within this center, creating an opportunity to generate trust and build informal relationships among students. All contacts stress the importance of the drop-in center for student success.

“The trust-building takes time, and has to be earned by school personnel, and [drop-in hours] are a great opportunity where that can happen very easily, because many of these young men and women are still dealing with feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities as adults when they’ve barely had anything of a childhood.”

- Council Interview

- **Foster youth support network:** Creating a formalized network of advocates and former foster youth across campus can assist hugely in helping students to feel comfortable at the university; however, participating in such a group may also have the effect of making students feel stigmatized by their status as former foster youth.

Spotlight on University C

When the Guardian Scholars program at **University C** was established, the program issued a press release to inform the university and surrounding community about efforts to support foster youth. The program coordinator was subsequently contacted by former foster youth in varying roles across campus, including faculty and staff, inquiring how they could assist the program. By leveraging these pre-existing connections to the foster care system, the university has been able to create a network across campus for Guardian Scholars.

- The program coordinator holds meetings with faculty and staff who are former foster youth, soliciting feedback and ideas about programming
- Each month, the program invites all of its contacts to a non-academic event for Guardian Scholars, allowing current students to interact informally with other members of the network

- **Counseling services:** Many former foster youth struggle with trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder. All contacts note the importance of offering free and unlimited counseling so that students have access to an unbiased listener; however, foster youth should not be forced to take advantage of counseling.

Spotlight on University A

This year, Guardian Scholars at **University A** piloted access to two part-time counselors (a psychologist and a therapist) as part of the program. Although students have access to the program’s director and coordinator for informal talks, they sometimes require professional help. Having access to counselors in the program’s drop-in center makes students much more inclined to seek help than if they were obliged to go to the counseling center; contacts estimate that around 25 percent of students in the program have taken advantage of the service.

IV. PROVIDING SERVICES

- **Mentoring:** Despite a general trend toward peer mentoring at the university level, contacts note particular challenges in creating a peer mentoring program among foster youth. It often takes foster youth a long time to trust, making it difficult to create a meaningful partnership when either student might not have the time to devote to the mentoring relationship. However, all contacts believe mentoring to be an important resource for foster youth, particularly in the first year as students transition out of the foster care system into higher education.

Spotlight on University A

- This year, Guardian Scholars staff are working to build a peer mentoring program for incoming Scholars. Each volunteer mentor, an upperclass student in the program, will fill out a survey and be matched with incoming students based on survey results (e.g., similar academic interests, background, etc.). Throughout the program's Summer Bridge, there will be teambuilding exercises for mentors and mentees. Based on unsuccessful experiences with previous attempts at creating a vibrant mentoring program, staff has been very careful to educate mentors about both time commitment and relationship-building tactics.
- Guardian Scholars also have access to formal mentoring through the Orangewood Children's Foundation, a partner of the Guardian Scholars program at universities across the state. The foundation's program matches mentors, either qualified adults or former foster youth, with foster youth up to the age of 25; the foundation provides training on expectations for the relationship. Contacts at note that this mentoring program has provided essential support for foster youth at the university, as well as informing internal efforts to create an effective mentoring program.

V. OUTSIDE RESOURCES

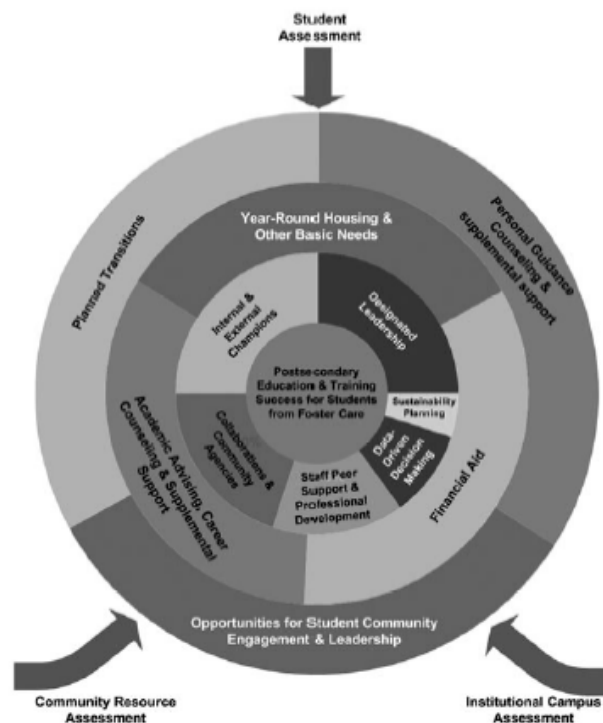
Regardless of the length of time a support program has been in place, all contacts stress the need for vibrant partnerships with resources outside the university. Several national foundations are dedicated to serving the needs of foster youth, and there are also a large number of state and local organizations that serve this population. In addition to helping university contacts obtain high-level administrative buy-in, identifying potential students from foster care, and providing specific services to students, these organizations have also published documents meant to guide universities throughout the process of building a program. One such national foundation is Casey Family Programs, a non-profit organization committed to assisting all those involved in the foster care system.

Insights from Casey Family Programs

All university contacts remarked upon the importance of partnering with Casey to build a successful support program for foster youth. Casey has created several publications to assist universities in various aspects of providing services to students who have aged out of the foster care system. One of these publications, *Supporting Success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care*, outlines a twelve-element programmatic framework within which universities can work to build a program. Contacts at Casey stress the importance of structuring services around the university's pre-existing resources:

"There's no specific, A to B to C to D prescriptive approach to this work. It has to be individualized, customized, embedded within the values, the practices, the resources of each school or higher ed institution."

- Council Interview



Source: *Supporting Success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care*, Casey Family Programs (2008), p. 6

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES NOTE

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