

Foster Care & Education

Q&A

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION RESOURCES FOR YOUTH IN AND TRANSITIONING OUT OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Q: What barriers do youth in care encounter starting and completing postsecondary education programs?

A: Fewer than 20 percent of eligible youth in foster care go on to higher education compared to 60 percent of youth in the general population. Moreover, very few of these students obtain bachelor's degrees. These disparities can be attributed to a variety of factors. Higher education is expensive, and many youth in care do not have family members or other adults who can help pay for their tuition, co-sign their college loans, or provide them with a free place to live while they are attending college or during school breaks. Even youth with more modest aspirations still find job training or career skills development programs (that are also part of post secondary education) unaffordable. But there is help available that can assist these students to achieve their goals.

Q: What is FAFSA and why should youth fill this out?

A: Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is an application used by Federal Student Aid, an office in the Department of Education. The application is used to determine the type and amount of federal financial aid (grants, work-study and loans) for which each student is eligible. Further, many state colleges, universities, and career schools use FAFSA information

to determine eligibility for their own assistance and scholarship programs.

Q: How is financial eligibility calculated for youth under FAFSA, especially for students involved with the child welfare system?

A: If a youth is considered "independent," only the youth's income – not that of a parent or guardian – is considered when determining whether a student is eligible for financial aid. In most cases, this means that the youth will be eligible for the maximum financial aid available. The law now states that an "independent student" includes a youth who is "an orphan, in foster care, or a ward of the court at any time when the individual was 13 years of age or older." Now significantly more former and current youth in care are eligible for federal financial assistance.

Q: How should a current or former foster youth fill out FAFSA?

A: The easiest way to fill out FAFSA is to go to www.fafsa.gov. The youth will need to provide login and identifying information, such as name, date of birth, and social security number. Each student will also need a pin to sign the application electronically, which can be found at the FAFSA site or at: <http://www.pin.ed.gov/PINWebApp/pinindex.jsp>. Remind

students that they should indicate they are “independent students.” A Financial Aid Administrator does not need to verify a student’s status unless there is conflicting information. Students can contact their financial aid administrators at the college they are attending for any specific questions about their school. For more tips on how to fill out certain questions of the FAFSA, how to identify a student as “independent,” or how to get a pin, visit <http://www.cacollegepathways.org/>, http://eop.sdsu.edu/pdf/files/FYSI_FINAL.pdf and <http://www.naehcy.org/tk/faa.html>.

Q: What are ETVs?

A: Education Training Vouchers (ETVs) are part of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program that provides a student with up to \$5,000 towards the cost of attending a post-secondary program of education or training. ETVs are available to children in foster care and those who entered kinship guardianship or adoption arrangements from foster care at age 16 or older. For more information, please visit <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/etv>.

Q: What is a tuition waiver and why do some states offer them to foster youth?

A: To make college and vocation schools more affordable, several states have created “waiver programs” that “waive” the tuition and fees of current and foster youth at colleges and vocational schools under certain conditions.

Nearly all states with tuition waiver programs limit their use to state-funded colleges and vocational schools within the state. Connecticut is one of a number of exceptions, and its tuition waiver can be used at public and private colleges inside or outside the state.

Generally, tuition waivers apply to all forms of postsecondary education – two or four year schools, vocational and technical programs, and community colleges. However, there is some variation among state waiver programs as to the types of education programs included.

Q: Does a tuition waiver cover the full cost of tuition and fees?

A: In the majority of states with tuition waiver programs, an eligible student must first apply for other

forms of federal and state financial aid; the tuition waiver covers the remaining costs. However, in a few states, such as Virginia and Texas, Education Training Vouchers under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program are not included in this calculation. In a few other states, such as Maine and Kansas, a tuition waiver covers the full cost of tuition and fees regardless of the level of federal and state financial aid a student receives. Please visit http://www.eckerdfamilyfoundation.org/docs/state_scholarship_guide.pdf and <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/etv/tuition-waiver> for more information.

Q: Do tuition waivers cover other college related expenses, such as room and board?

A: In most states, tuition waivers only cover tuition and fees. Again Connecticut is an exception, and its tuition waivers can be used to cover the full cost of attending college – tuition, fees, room and board, books, tutoring, transportation, and health care. In several states where tuition waivers only cover tuition and fees, other help may be available to pay for the remaining college related expenses such as room and board. Several states that offer tuition waivers also permit youth to remain in foster care until the age of 21 so that the room and board expenses are paid for by their state’s child welfare system.

Q: Who is eligible to receive a tuition waiver?

A: To receive a tuition waiver, a student must have been in foster care during a specific period of his or her youth (this differs among states). For example, in Oklahoma, students are eligible for tuition waivers if they were in foster care for at least nine months between their 16th and 18th birthdays. In Maryland, students are eligible so long as they were in foster care when they received a high school diploma or GED. In several states, youth who were adopted from foster care after a certain age are also eligible to receive tuition waivers. For example, in North Carolina, youth who were adopted from foster care on or after their 12th birthday are eligible. For state-specific information about tuition waiver programs, see <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/etv/tuition-waiver>.

Q: Are there any supportive services or on-campus programs available to current or former foster youth once they are enrolled at a college or university?

A: Among other states, California and Washington have developed campus-based support programs to provide assistance to students who were formerly in foster care with financial aid, mental health services, housing issues, and other supports. The best way to find out if a specific college, university, or school has an on-campus program is to contact the financial aid or student affairs office to find out what types of assistance they provide. Check out these links for more information about some of the programs around the country:

- California College Pathways: www.cacollegepathways.org
- Western Michigan University News: <http://www.wmich.edu/wmu/news/2008/01/041.htm>
- Michigan State University, Spartan Youth Programs: Scholarships for Youth in Foster Care: <http://spartanyouth.msu.edu/Resource.aspx?ResourceID=146>
- Colorado State University, Fostering Success Scholarship: <http://sfs.colostate.edu/csuscholarship-application-csusa>
- Supporting Success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care: <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/SupportingSuccess.pdf>

Q: What other supports are available to foster youth to help ensure student success?

A: As part of the federal TRIO program, the Federal Department of Education offers Student Support Services (SSS) grants to postsecondary programs to increase college retention and graduation rates for low income students. SSS programs provide tutoring, academic and career counseling as well as counseling and assistance in applying for financial aid. SSS programs can also provide services that may be of particular help to current and former youth in foster care such as mentoring, and help in securing temporary housing during breaks in the academic year. Federal law also allows postsecondary programs to use SSS grants to create programs that are tailored to the needs of youth in or who have aged out of foster care.

If a youth has a physical or behavioral health disability that impairs the student's access to or ability to benefit from a postsecondary education program, the program should provide the student with reasonable accommodations. The Americans with Disabilities Act (and for programs that receive federal financial assistance the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) prohibit a school from discriminating against a qualified individual on the basis of disability. The school must ensure that the programs it offers, including extracurricular activities, are reasonably accessible to students with disabilities. Postsecondary schools can do this in a number of ways, such as ensuring architectural access, providing aids and services necessary for effective communication, and modifying discriminatory policies, practices and procedures. If a student has a disability or impairment that requires some type of accommodation, youth and their advocates should be sure to request it.

Checklist to Help Current and Transitioning Foster Youth Attend and Complete Post-Secondary Education and Training Programs

- ❑ **Step 1-FAFSA:** Make sure students fill out their FAFSA on or before March 1 of the year they plan on attending school. Ex: If they plan on attending college in the fall of 2013, their FAFSA should be completed by March 1, 2013.
- ❑ **Step 2-ETVs:** Find out if the State where the student plans on attending school provides ETVs. Use the following links below, or contact the financial aid offices at the schools youth are applying/planning to attend to see what they provide.
 - ETV Vouchers by State - <https://www.statevoucher.org/>
 - South Dakota Department of Social Services - <http://dss.sd.gov/cps/independentlivingprogram/educationtraining.asp>
- ❑ **Step 3-Tuition Waivers:** Find out if the State where the student plans on attending school provides tuition waivers. Follow the links below for more information.
 - North American Council on Adoptable Children: - <http://www.nacac.org/adoptionssubsidy/factsheets/tuition.html>
 - Adoption.com - <http://library.adoption.com/articles/college-tuition-waiver-and-scholarship-programs.html>
- ❑ **Step 4-Scholarships:** Are there any other scholarships that a state provides for youth formerly in foster care? Several states offer a multitude of other scholarships that can benefit youth in foster care. Follow the links below or contact a particular school's financial aid office to learn more about these opportunities.
 - College Scholarships.org - <http://www.collegescholarships.org/scholarships/foster.htm>
 - Western Michigan Scholarship - <http://diverseeducation.com/article/10813/>
http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2009/05/western_michigan_university_pr_7.html
 - Education Coordinating Council - http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org/ECC_ResourcesSCHOL.htm
- ❑ **Step 5-On Campus Programs:** Are there any on campus services or programs to assist youth? Many new programs are starting for students that can help with financial, housing, academic, and social problems. Some programs cater specifically to current and former youth in foster care, while others are available to the general student population. Do the research and check out the links below. Also, encourage youth to reach out to student groups or programs on campus, even if they don't think they will need any help. Being involved and establishing relationships helps every student, regardless of his or her background, adjust to college life and will be important if unpredictable situations arise that require youth to seek help.
 - Colorado State Programs - <http://osp.casa.colostate.edu/foster.aspx>
 - Washington's Passport for Foster Youth Promise Program - <http://www.collegesuccessfoundation.org/Page.aspx?pid=419>
 - College Success Foundation - <http://www.collegesuccessfoundation.org/page.aspx?pid=411>
 - Guardian Scholars Program - <http://www.fullerton.edu/guardianscholars/>
- ❑ **Step 6-Other Supportive Services:** Are there any other supportive services or financial help available at the education institution from, for example, programs financed through Student Support Services (SSS) grants from the Department of Education? Use the following links for more guidance.
 - Student Support Services - <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html>
 - Northwestern College- <http://www.nwc.edu/web/academic-support/ada/disability-services-doss>
 - Quincy University - <http://www.quincy.edu/academics/academic-services/ada-support>
 - TRiO Programs - <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>