

10
YEARS

FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE SUCCESS INITIATIVE
IMPACT STUDY



**BRIDGING GAPS
AND BUILDING
FUTURES**

Charting a Path to
Equity for Foster Youth
in Higher Education

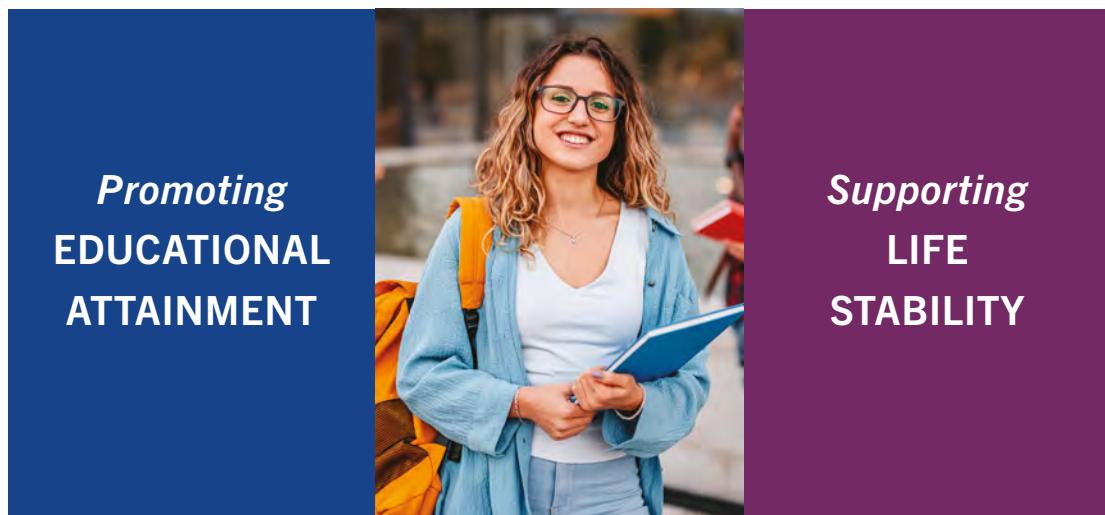
FOSTERING ■
YOUTH SUCCESS
■ ALLIANCE

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Executive Summary

The **Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA)** is a statewide advocacy group that promotes responsive policies and programs that offer young people with a foster care background every opportunity to set higher expectations and achieve their goals. FYSA is dedicated to data-driven systems reform, raising public awareness, and securing stabilizing supports that empower youth across New York to overcome barriers and excel in life.



For more than 10 years, FYSA has tackled the challenges and abrupt transitions to adulthood experienced by youth with a foster care background. FYSA advocates for targeted investments in resources and supports to give system-impacted young people a fair chance in education and stability.

In 2015, the Alliance created the **Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)** to give current and former foster youth a stronger foundation for success by easing financial burdens, expanding supports, and creating pathways to better long-term outcomes through higher education.

In spring 2025, FYSA examined FYCSI's impact on students and identified ways to strengthen the program's reach and effectiveness for future cohorts.

This report presents the findings of an impact study. It covers recent trends, participant feedback, and recommendations for sustaining and expanding a strong educational support model for foster youth.

Program Overview

FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE SUCCESS INITIATIVE

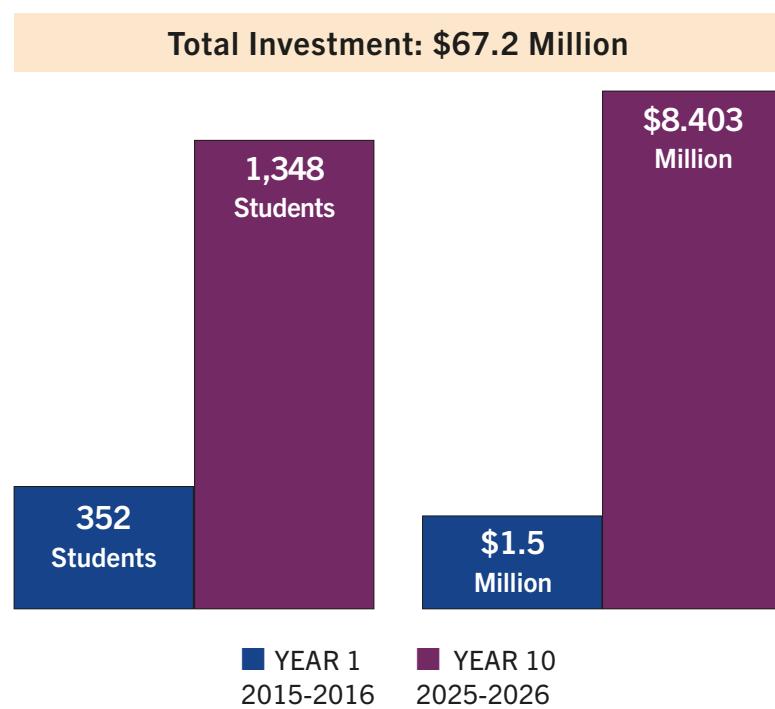
FYCSI is a critical financial and academic assistance program that addresses persistent obstacles to post-secondary access and educational success for current and former foster youth in New York State. Despite the well-documented benefits of higher education for future earning potential and economic mobility, many youth with foster care experience struggle to make the leap from high school to college. Typically, system-involved young people lack sufficient guidance in navigating enrollment, applying for financial aid, and accessing tutoring and other resources necessary to achieve their educational goals.

FYCSI serves youth currently in the foster care system, foster care alumni, and orphans enrolled

in public colleges or universities and private post-secondary institutions participating in New York State Higher Education Opportunity Programs (HEOPs). The program bridges financial gaps for eligible students who have already applied for federal and Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) funding.

Awards are disbursed annually through students' financial assistance packages and are allocated each year in the New York State budget. The New York State Education Department calculates the per-student award based on the annual budget allotment and the number of eligible applicants for that academic year. FYSA members, including youth leaders with lived experience, lead annual advocacy efforts to sustain the program's budget and meet demand.

Foster Youth College Success Initiative A DECADE OF SUPPORT



FYSA collaborates with state, city, and agency partners to oversee continuous quality improvement and ensure FYCSI remains youth-centered, accountable, and flexible to meet the priority needs of eligible students.

FYCSI PROGRAM PARTNERS

- NYS Education Department (NYSED)
- Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC)
- State University of New York (SUNY)
- Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS)
- City University of New York (CUNY)
- NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS)

Students may apply FYCSI funding to a wide range of expenses, including tuition and fees, housing (including intersession accommodations), books, school supplies, transportation, medical bills, and other essential personal items. This trust-based approach reflects input from students with foster care experience and supports their autonomy in decision-making.

Another key differentiation from other tuition assistance programs is the absence of an age cap for FYCSI funding. Many foster youth need extra time to stabilize after transitioning from the child welfare system. Others may need to recover from illness, manage parenting responsibilities, or cope with family loss before pursuing college.

“ FYCSI has changed my life in the sense of being able to support my schooling. Losing both of my parents was traumatic, and then not being able to afford schooling was an added stressor. Nine years of not being able to afford college, and then in 2024 that all changed thanks to FYCSI.”



Program Overview

Foster Youth College Success Initiative STUDENT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

“FOSTER YOUTH”	“ORPHAN”
<p>Students who spent any time in foster care after age 13, including those:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Subsequently reunified with their birth families, OR adopted after their 13th birthdays✓ Living with a relative or kin under a kinship foster care agreement✓ Aged out of foster care✓ In foster care in another state, but meet the opportunity program residency requirements of being a NYS resident for at least 1 year or received a high school diploma from a high school in NYS✓ Without lawful immigration status or those who fall within a category of individuals outlined in Section 661(b)(i) of the NY Education Law	<p>Students who became orphans after age 13</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Both parents are deceased.✓ Financial Aid Administrators use their professional judgment to dependency override in unusual circumstances.
<p>To be eligible, students must ALSO be enrolled in ONE of the Higher Education Institutions listed below:</p> <p>SUNY • CUNY • Private College/University* in New York State</p> <p><small>*Private schools must operate a Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). Students do NOT need to be enrolled in the HEOP to qualify for FYCSI.</small></p>	
<p>Eligible students who have experienced foster care may apply for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• FYCSI assistance at any point during their undergraduate college enrollment.• Awards as general financial assistance or for certain expenses, such as books or housing, that meet a demonstrated need.	

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

In 2024, the Rockefeller Institute of Government evaluated FYCSI's impact on SUNY students. The study confirmed the model's promising potential to close gaps in higher education access and improve academic persistence among young people with a foster care background.

FYCSI award recipients at SUNY consistently achieved higher college retention rates than comparable student groups, including peers from foster care who were not enrolled in the program. Notably, students receiving FYCSI support were more likely to re-enroll from their first to second year at rates exceeding those of Pell Grant recipients, underrepresented minority groups, and the overall SUNY student population. Program participants also posted higher graduation rates for associate degrees within two to three years, and were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree within six years compared to non-participants (Backstrom, 2024).

“ I faced challenges in finding resources, financial support, and people to advocate for me in college until I heard about this program. I ended up getting a designated FYCSI person at school to help me understand the support I have through this amazing program.”

FYCSI demonstrates what is possible when systems collaborate to advance educational equity, youth empowerment, and transformational support—restoring hope and promise to young people striving for success. Policymakers can build on the lessons of this promising program to ensure that every young person with foster care experience has the resources, flexibility, and institutional support to earn a degree and have a stable future.



- ✓ The **Foster Youth College Success Initiative at SUNY** has offered critical financial support to young adults who have experienced foster care, aiding their journeys to and through college.
- ✓ Demand for FYCSI support continues to grow as more and more students apply for and receive these awards, and early results point to the program's potential positive impacts.
- ✓ Data also shows that the initiative may play a role in narrowing the graduation rate gap among racial groups, which is particularly notable considering that financial assistance typically covers only a portion of the students' enrollment period.

Higher Education & Foster Youth



Education is a critical driver of individual opportunity, thriving communities, and economic resilience.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Extensive research demonstrates that higher levels of educational attainment are associated with outcomes closely aligned with core policy goals, such as economic mobility, workforce readiness, and reduced reliance on public assistance. Specifically, individuals who complete post-secondary education have markedly better outcomes than those without, including:

- Higher lifetime incomes and greater employment stability than those whose education ends with a high school diploma (Scherer & King, 2025; Gonzalez et al., 2023).
- Lower unemployment and poverty rates, and increased social mobility (Scherer & King; Gonzalez et al., 2023).
- Better physical health and higher rates of insurance coverage (OASH, n.d.; Scherer & King, 2025; Lawrence, 2018).
- Less reliance on public benefit programs, such as Medicaid, SNAP, and housing vouchers (OASH, n.d.; Scherer & King, 2025; Lawrence, 2018).
- Increased participation in civic life through volunteering and community engagement, strengthening neighborhoods and the tax base (Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Despite these tangible benefits, young people with foster care experience face complex barriers that disproportionately limit their path to higher education. Historically, foster youth have had lower post-secondary enrollment, persistence,

and completion rates compared to their peers, including other populations with unique needs, such as first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Gross, 2019).

In New York State, approximately 7,000 youth exit foster care each year, with nearly 25% leaving when they emancipate at age 18 (Backstrom, 2024). As they graduate high school and transition to adulthood, they typically lack consistent encouragement, reliable support systems, and the financial means to continue to college. Many end up working low-wage jobs, believing higher education is not a reasonable expectation given their circumstances. As a result, ending their educational journey after high school often narrows future career options and long-term economic prospects.

BRIDGING GAPS AND BUILDING FUTURES

FYCSI is designed to expand higher education opportunities for young people with foster care backgrounds. The program directly benefits participants by covering expenses beyond standard financial aid, such as tuition gaps, housing, books, and campus living costs, to help eligible students start, persist, and complete college. Funded annually by the New York State budget and administered by the New York State Education Department, FYCSI demonstrates the

state's commitment to educational equity and economic mobility for system-impacted youth.

FYCSI ENROLLMENT AND FUNDING TRENDS

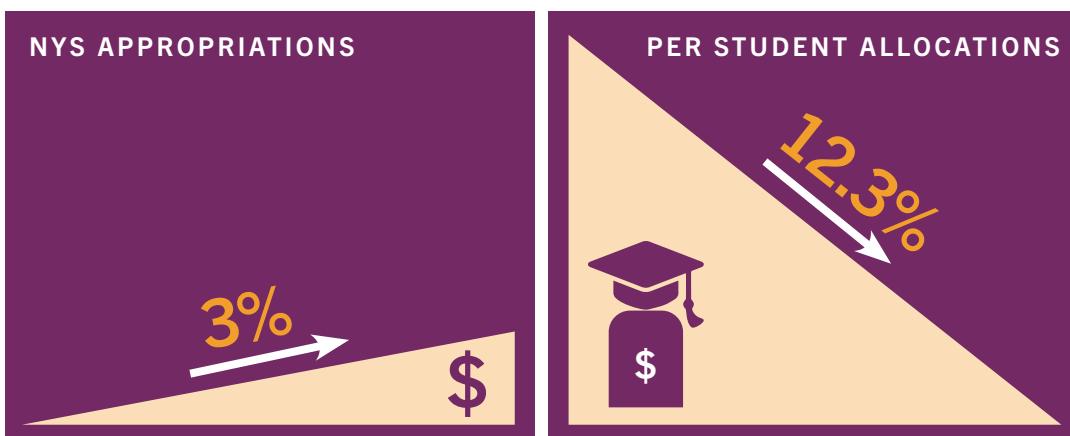
Increasing and establishing baseline funding for FYCSI is essential to provide current and future generations of New York foster youth with equitable opportunities to pursue higher education, graduate, and thrive alongside their peers.

Despite a **3.0% increase** (\$242,000) in state budget appropriations for FYCSI over the past three years, per-pupil allocations **fell by an alarming 12.3%** (\$875) due to enrollment growth. This funding gap and rising costs for housing, food, and transportation create more economic strain for program participants, who must absorb a larger share of basic college expenses. Without immediate intervention, this additional financial hardship will disrupt enrollment continuity and undermine their academic focus.

Participants in the FYCSI *Impact Study* acknowledged they often have to take a job—or multiple jobs—to make ends meet. Many survey respondents credited FYCSI with enabling them to prioritize their coursework, alleviating the constant worry of tuition payments and reducing the need to maintain full-time employment while attending school.

“ Ideally, you want to attend school and be able to direct all of your attention to your studies, but without financial support, it’s just not possible. Having to work to support yourself while attending school full-time is very taxing. The FYCSI grant releases a lot of that burden, which means I can direct more of my energy to my school work.”

THE GROWING GAP: Enrollment Up, Dollars Per Student Down



Enrollment levels and rising costs have outpaced recent FYCSI funding increases, resulting in declining per-pupil support despite higher total appropriations.

Academic Year	NYS Appropriation	FYCSI Recipients	Allocation Per Pupil
2025-26	\$8,403,000	1,348	\$6,234
2024-25	\$8,282,000	1,285	\$6,445
2023-24	\$8,161,000	1,148	\$7,109
2022-23	\$8,161,000	919	\$8,880
2021-22	\$7,200,000	921	\$7,818
2020-21	\$6,000,000	1,043	\$5,753
2019-20	\$6,000,000	975	\$6,154

SOURCE: New York State Education Department

The Impact Study

PURPOSE AND GOALS

FYSA sought to fully understand the impact of its signature program after a decade of implementation in New York State. The FYCSI *Impact Study* collected both quantitative and qualitative data to assess the program's strengths and inform future strategies to enhance its reach and effectiveness. Key evaluation questions included:

- How did FYCSI recipients use the awarded funds?
- What do participating students value about the program?
- What program awareness, enrollment, and administrative challenges need to be addressed?
- How do funding gaps and student financial burdens contribute to persistent academic progression barriers?

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND ANALYSIS

FYSA used a co-design research model for the *Impact Study*, engaging stakeholders familiar with both FYCSI and its target population. The team collaborated with the Children's Aid Public Policy staff, its Office of Performance Management (OPM), and external partners from At The Table and The Schuyler Center for Advocacy and Analysis.

Additionally, seven system-impacted young people with direct experience in both New York State higher education and FYCSI served

as integral members of the study design team. These lived experts played a pivotal role in shaping data collection methods and the survey instrument, including identifying the most relevant questions to assess the program's impact and challenges facing college students with a foster care background. They also worked with FYSA and OPM analysts to refine survey language, ensuring instructions and questions were appropriate and accessible for the target population. All co-design partners contributed to participant outreach and survey distribution strategies to achieve statewide reach.

From March to May 2025, FYSA widely disseminated a 52-question online survey to New York State foster care agencies and resource providers. The survey included screening, demographic, multiple-choice, and free-response questions. The selected platform, SurveyMonkey, allowed for encryption, privacy features, and filtering for incomplete and fraudulent responses. As an incentive, participants who completed valid surveys received a \$20 gift card.

OPM analysts applied data cleaning techniques, resulting in a final study sample of **130 valid respondents**. After processing and analysis, FYSA presented initial findings to the lived experts on the design team and stakeholders with policy expertise, who provided input on how these results could inform future FYCSI strategies and evaluation.

*See APPENDIX
Study Design • Future Research Notes*

The Impact Study

PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

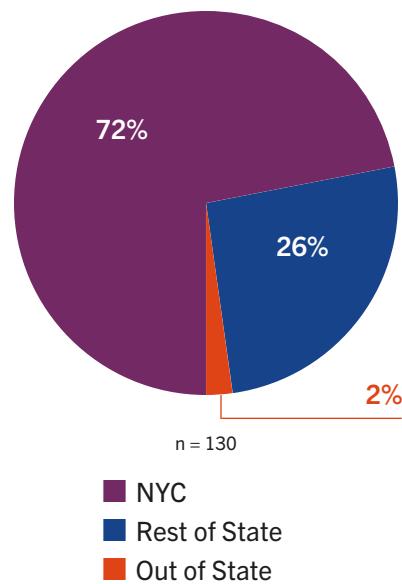
Among respondents deemed valid by OPM, the majority (89%) were students with a foster care background who had directly benefited from FYCSI financial aid, with 85% of this group indicating they planned to access this funding again in the future. Fourteen respondents were program-eligible but had not yet used FYCSI funding.

Participant Demographics

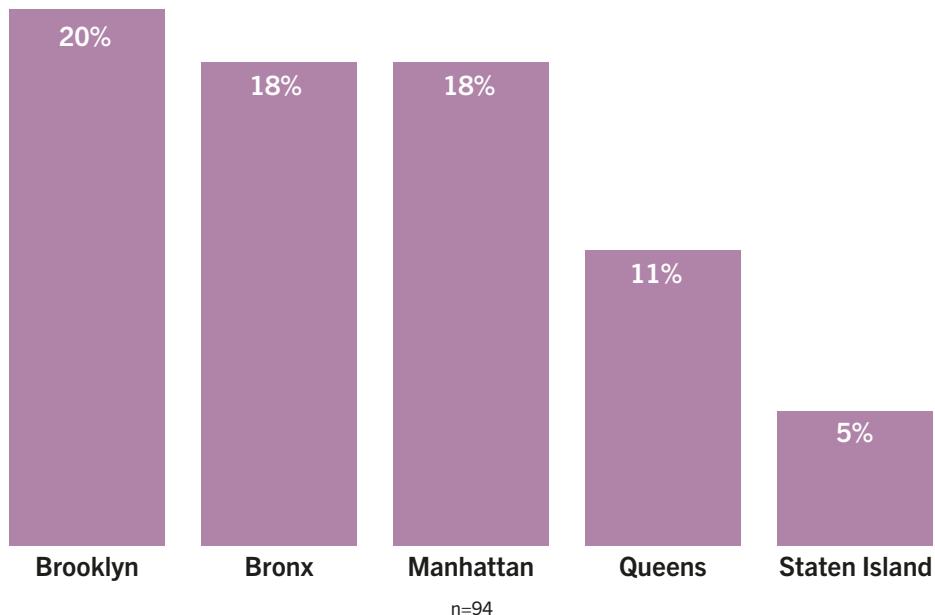
For the geographic and age-group profile data presented in this report, it is important to note that survey distribution does not necessarily reflect actual utilization of FYCSI across the state. These demographic data represent only the implementation of the survey and the characteristics of validated respondents, not the full program population.

Most respondents came from New York City.

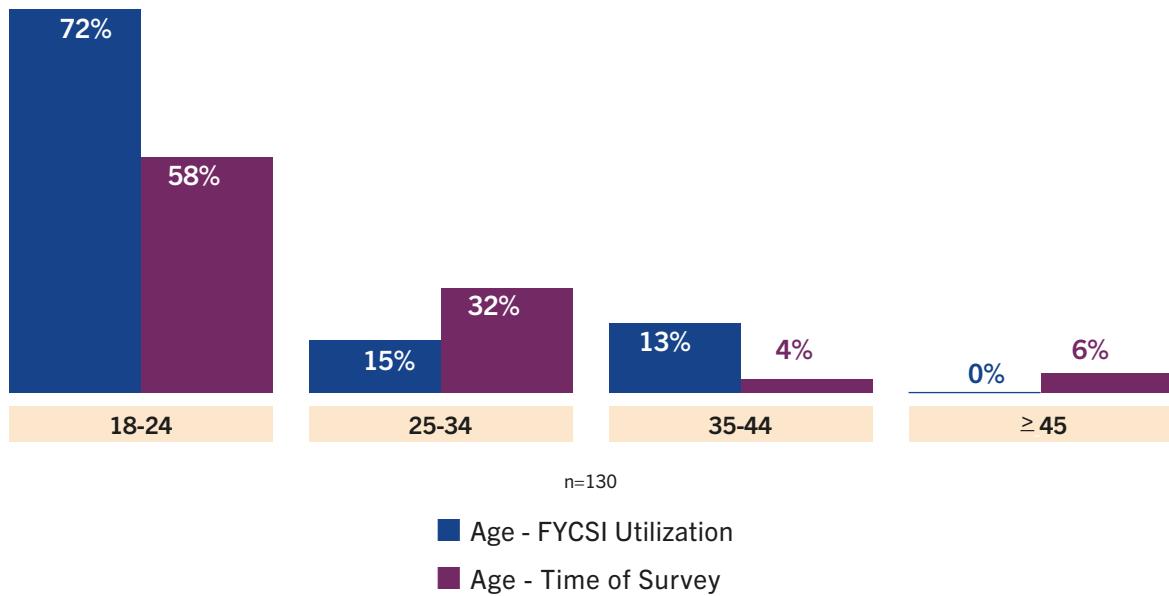
Survey Respondents by Region



NYC-based Survey Respondents by Borough



The majority of respondents were young adults age 18 to 24 years old.



Other Key Characteristics of Study Participants:

38 became **orphans** before they turned 18 years old.

33 were **parents or caregivers** when they utilized FYCSI.



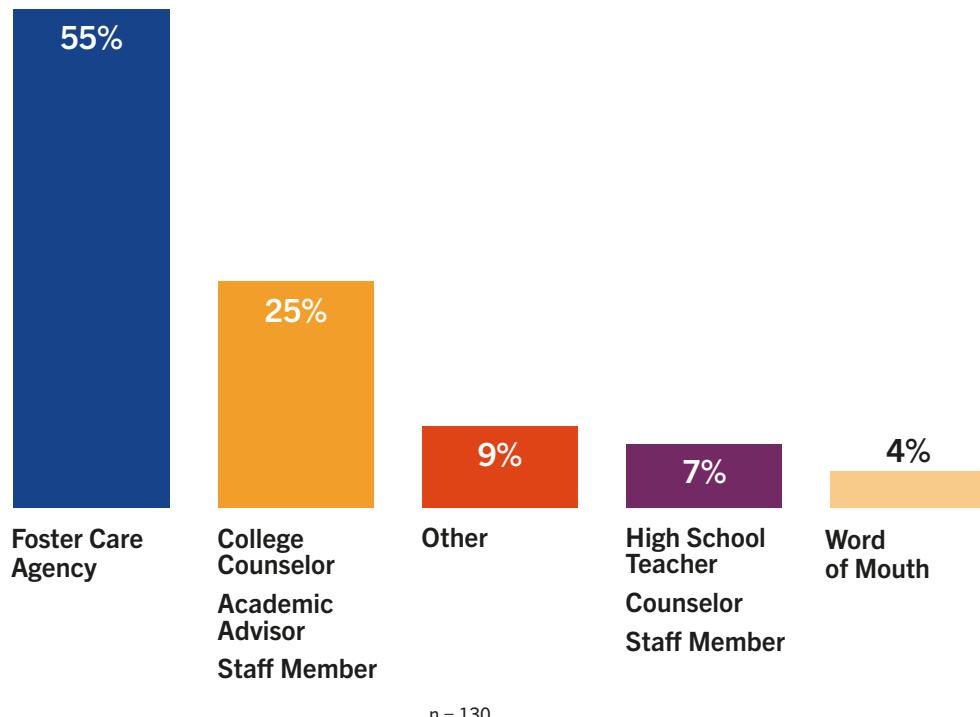
Key Findings

Survey results highlight FYCSI's impact on system-involved youth and their higher education experiences.

► STUDENT PROGRAM AWARENESS

Most survey respondents learned about FYCSI through someone at their foster care agency, and 77% were already enrolled in college when they first became aware of the program.

How did you learn about the Foster Youth College Success Initiative?



“

Communication gaps between my foster care agency and the college delayed my eligibility approval.”

When did you learn about the Foster Youth College Success Initiative?

100 survey respondents were **already in college/university**.

30 survey respondents were **in high school**.

“

I was not made aware of this program when I was pursuing my associate's degree and did not utilize it until I was 35 years old and returning to college.”



“

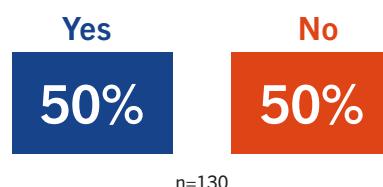
I was not aware of this program earlier so I had to work a full-time job and part-time job to pay living expenses.”

Key Findings

► APPLICATION PROCESS AND COLLEGE SELECTION

The vast majority of respondents (93%) found the program application instructions and process to be clear. Results were mixed on whether FYCSI enrollment influenced school choice, which is consistent with the previous finding that most respondents first learned about the program after starting college.

Did receiving FYCSI aid influence where you chose to attend college/university?



“

FYCSI is amazing, but I didn't find out about it until my third semester in college.”

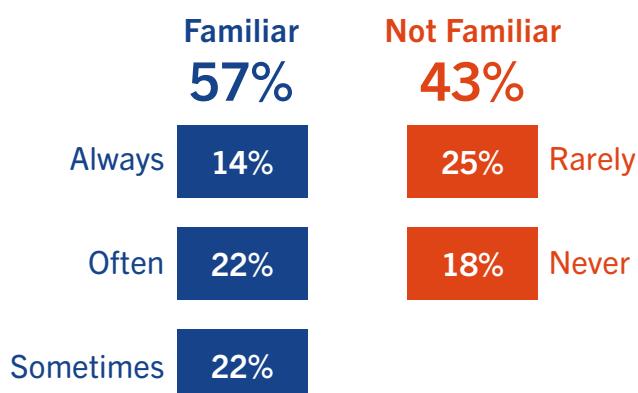


► PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION AND CAMPUS SUPPORT

Respondents reflected on program visibility and the quality of service coordination on campus, including communication and fund distribution.

Most FYCSI aid recipients who took the survey found campus staff to be familiar with available resources, and were generally satisfied with how their institutions administered the program. However, some students felt they missed meaningful opportunities to engage with FYCSI earlier due to limited promotion.

When you enrolled in your college/university, how often did you find an on-campus resource who was familiar with FYCSI?

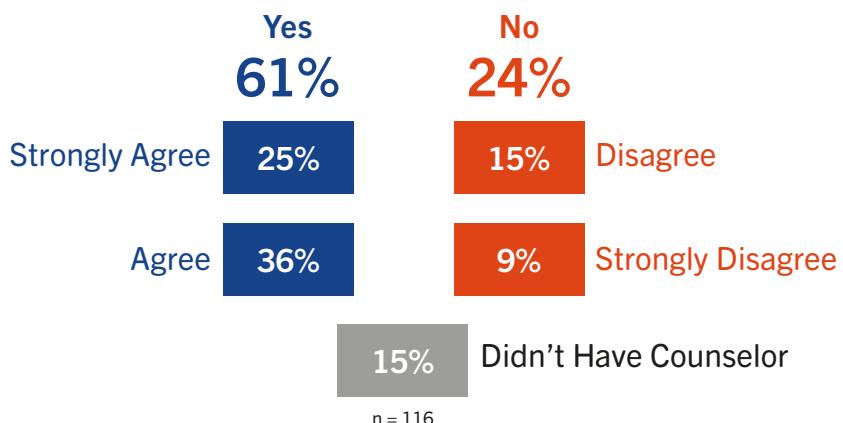


“

I went through immense stress because I was automatically mislabeled as requiring the same paperwork as my peers who didn't experience the foster system. I was made to contact my birth parents, despite repeatedly relaying that I had an exempt status.”

Key Findings

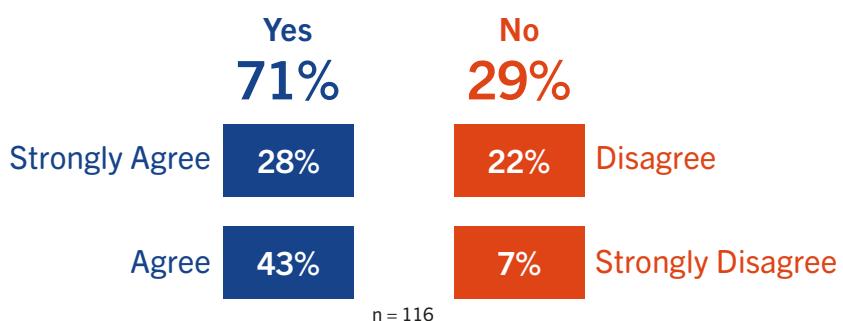
My higher education counselors were familiar with FYCSI.



“

My college's financial aid office wasn't familiar with FYCSI, so I had to explain the program myself.”

I feel good about the overall awareness of FYCSI at my higher education institution.



“

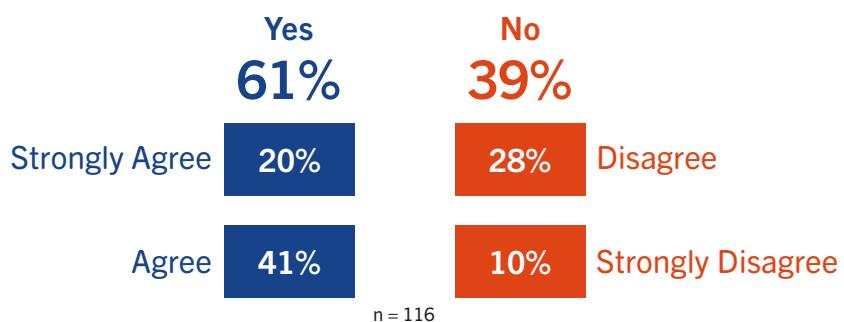
Although I am very grateful for the financial support that the FYCSI grant has given me to complete my education, I wish there had been more communication about the program, how it operates, and how I can use the funding. I could have used this program a lot sooner... I only stumbled on it while doing a Google search.”



The *Impact Study* details communication gaps regarding funding distribution identified by some students in the survey sample.

Among the 116 respondents who had utilized FYCSI, 39% stated they didn't know when they would receive funds each semester, and 12% mentioned budgeting challenges caused by unexpected delays in disbursement.

I know when I will receive FYCSI funding each semester.

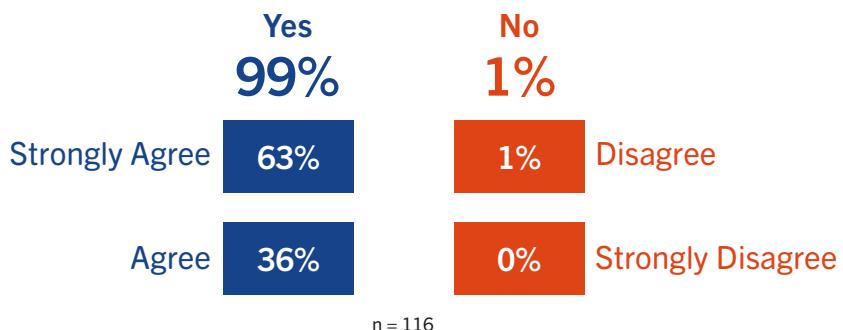


Key Findings

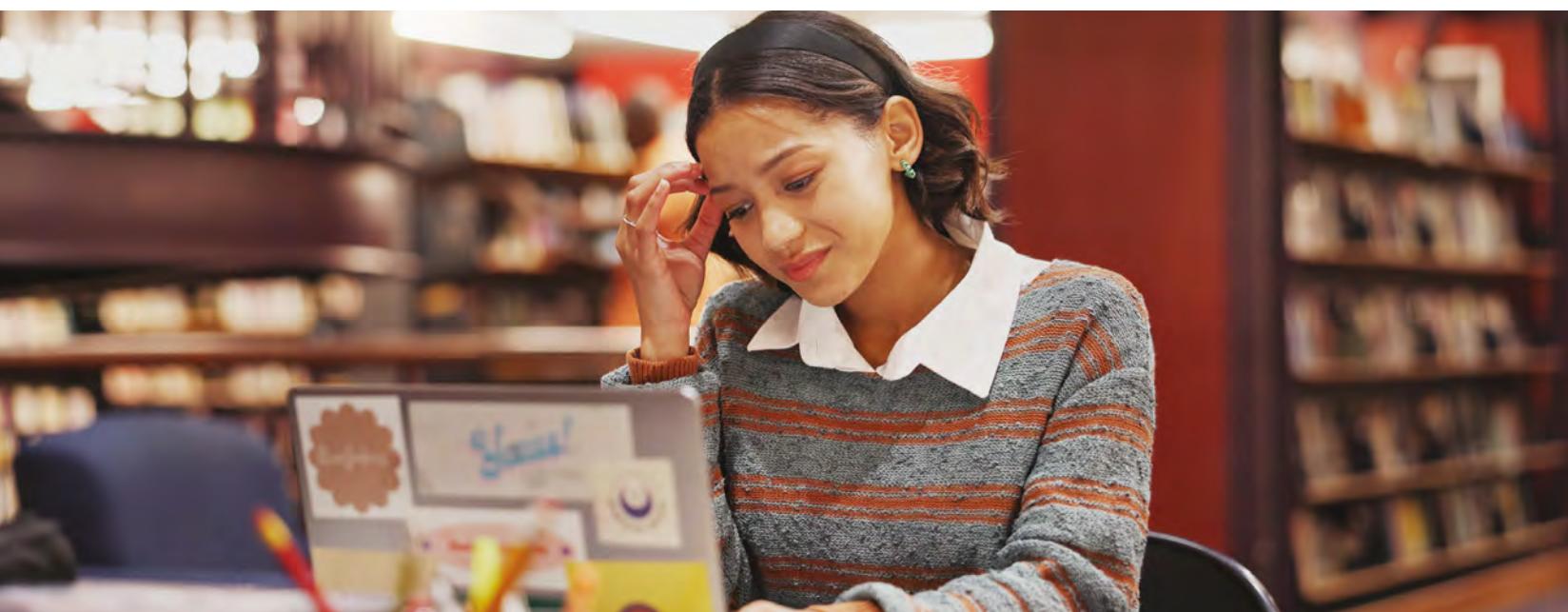
► FINANCIAL STABILITY AND FUNDING UTILIZATION

Navigating personal finances while in school can be highly stressful for young adults living independently for the first time. Nearly all study participants (99%) identified financial literacy as essential for a successful college experience.

Financial literacy is important for my path to higher education.

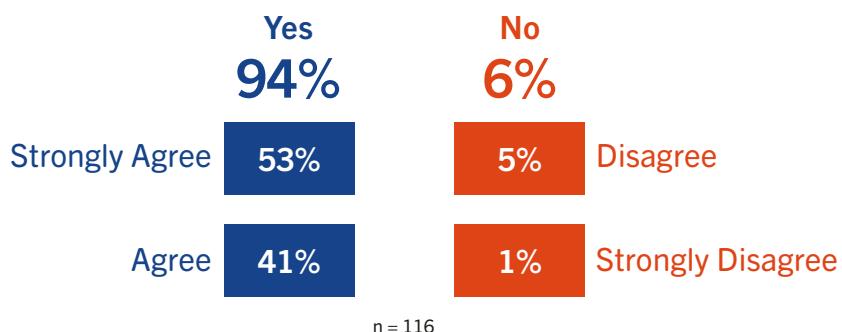


Money management challenges are particularly acute for current and former foster youth, who often lack family support to address cash flow gaps, unexpected expenses, or critical payment deadlines that could delay college admissions or class enrollment.



Among study respondents who used FYCSI funds, 94% agreed that financial uncertainty causes significant distress and undermines their focus on educational goals.

The stress about my source of funding has an impact on my academic performance.



“

FYCSI moved the stress off my shoulders after they paid for my tuition. I would probably have had to work and do other things, which could have hindered my ability to attend class, let alone succeed in college.”

“

FYCSI provided essentials needed for my education, leaving me more time to focus on my academics.”

Key Findings

Survey participants were asked how they used their program funding, allowing them to select all applicable options from a menu of typical student expense categories.

Textbooks and tuition were the primary expenses covered by FYCSI grants, with funds also applied to housing, meals, personal items, and transportation.

For which expense categories did you use FYCSI funding?



Textbooks
73%



Tuition
69%



Housing
59%



Meals
59%



Personal Expenses
52%



Transportation
51%



Other
14%

n = 116

Many FYCSI students in the survey sample expressed deep gratitude for the program's extra support, which alleviated stress, helped them remain in school, and improved their financial stability.

Despite the funding, 30 respondents (26%) reported ongoing economic hardship while attending college, citing rising housing costs, food insecurity, loan repayments, and a lack of affordable child care for parenting students.

“ I use the funding to pay for my housing, tuition, food, and class materials – but food has gotten so much more expensive, along with housing and class materials. Even with the extra funds, I will need to continue holding at least a part-time job. I have to house myself during school breaks, which means I have to pay more than other students.”

“ FYCSI was a large stipend that helped me cover many things related to school, such as tuition, supplies, and other needs. However, day-to-day stuff is rough until that stipend comes in.”

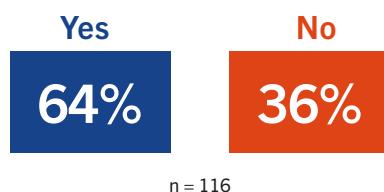
“ It helped me cover tuition and expenses while attending college. I'm disabled, and being able to utilize FYCSI took the burden of paying for tuition out of pocket.”

Key Findings

► THE STRESS OF COMPETING PRIORITIES

Study findings demonstrate that FYCSI funding alleviated financial stress for many young people in the program. However, some students were forced to juggle academic and work demands to cover financial gaps due to the high cost of housing, a primary reason students continued to work while in school.

Did FYCSI funding reduce the need to work while you were attending college?



Several respondents reported experiencing greater peace of mind after connecting to the program. For these students, FYCSI provided a degree of financial stability they had not previously known, allowing them to dedicate more time and attention to their studies.

28% **reported lower stress levels** as a result of the program's support.

9% **stated that FYCSI funds relieved worry about tuition costs** and reduced their need to work while in college.

7% **reported that FYCSI covered all or most of their expenses, eliminating or significantly reducing their need to work.**

“

FYCSI gave me the ability to not stress out about college and work at the same time. Finding work is extremely hard, especially as a college student with medical issues. I have a lot more time to gain experience, find the perfect job, and prioritize my health.”

“

By combining FYCSI funds with scholarships, I could quit my weekend retail job entirely.”



“

Thanks to the FYCSI housing grants, I could live on campus without taking a night job to pay rent.”

“

I am able to prioritize my health when I have free time from classes, and I have more time to gain experience and try new things.”

Key Findings

“ FYCSI had a huge impact on my need to work. Instead of trying to get as many work hours as I can, I could focus on my schoolwork.”

12% indicated that while FYCSI covered some costs, other expenses, such as rent and utilities, **required them to continue working**.

11% mentioned that the program stipends **were not impactful enough to reduce their stress levels**.

“ It wasn’t enough to stop working, but it helped tremendously with rent, utilities, and food. I highly appreciate the funding.”

“ As someone balancing part-time work, caring for my household, and staying on top of my academics, the challenges were heavy, but FYCSI made them more manageable.”



► ACKNOWLEDGING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

Young people who experience foster care face unique challenges as they heal from childhood trauma and become college students. Lingering issues stemming from difficult family situations can disrupt their academic progress.

The survey asked participants to share examples of additional challenges to illustrate some of the common barriers to success for system-impacted students.

“Living on my own was a pretty difficult journey from start to end, especially with finances. It’s been a pretty difficult process, but I know getting my degree will help me have financial freedom.”

“I personally struggle with mental health, and I see a therapist and get medication, which means I also have to schedule appointments along with work and classes—which is hard.”

“I try to stay focused and be my own hero for my children and prove that, even though my path was tough-going through the foster care system for years—I can stand and say I finally made it. I’m still on this journey, but the difference is, I’m much closer.”

Priorities & Recommendations

1

Invest in Future Success

**Raise the yearly allocation for
FYCSI to keep pace
with enrollment.**

- ▶ Decades of research show that foster youth have a more difficult, complicated pathway to higher education. In the aftermath of family disruption and childhood trauma, these young people need financial assistance to enroll, persist, and graduate from college. System-impacted young people deserve more than just survival-level support as they pursue their degrees.
- ▶ FYCSI is a crucial lifeline that makes a post-secondary degree more attainable, yet recent state appropriations have not kept pace with program growth. As a result, for the past three years, FYCSI aid has typically covered only a portion of the actual cost of attending college. Without traditional family support, this financial gap pressures many current and former foster youth to delay or abandon their educational goals as they struggle to pay for rent, food, and other living necessities.
- ▶ For the current fiscal year, a 19% increase in FYCSI funding (an additional \$1,597,000) is necessary to sustain the positive academic outcomes achieved by participants and ensure a more equitable per-student stipend as the program expands and costs rise due to inflation.

2

Improve Institutional Awareness & Accountability

**Connect current and former
foster youth to all available
post-secondary resources.**

- ▶ We should not expect college-bound foster youth to navigate complex financial aid systems independently or be responsible for educating institutional staff about program eligibility criteria and status determinations. Many survey respondents reported learning about FYCSI on their own, noting a lack of awareness among foster care agency staff and college financial aid officers regarding both available funding and their independent student status.
- ▶ Financial aid, admissions, and other administrative personnel need greater awareness, training, and accountability to fully understand and proactively share all available resources for foster youth applicants.

3 Increase Pre-College Promotion to Eligible Youth

Eligible students need to know about FYCSI and other higher education assistance programs before they graduate high school.

4 Address Unmet Needs to Boost Academic Success

Transition-age foster youth often require stabilizing supports to focus on their education.

5 Scale What Works

Replicate FYCSI nationwide to improve access to higher education for more youth with a foster care background.

Many foster care students do not receive financial aid information until much later in their higher education journey –sometimes after they have incurred significant loan debt or dropped out of college due to economic reasons.

To remove barriers to success, financial aid information must reach foster youth before and during the college application process, enabling them to make informed decisions and access the support they are entitled to from the very start of their college experience.

While FYCSI funding is instrumental in bringing college within reach for foster youth, investing in structural supports that address basic needs is equally essential for their overall stability and well-being.

As highlighted in this study, students sometimes use FYCSI funds to cover non-academic expenses such as food, housing, health care, and child care. Expanding access to affordable options and comprehensive wraparound supports will ease the financial strain that can derail academic progress.

After a decade of implementation, FYCSI has proven to be a flexible, inclusive, and effective model for supporting the educational attainment of system-impacted youth. Unlike many programs, FYCSI does not impose age-based eligibility caps and allows students to use funds for a wide range of post-secondary needs. This participant-centered approach empowers students to allocate resources according to their individual circumstances as they pursue college degrees.

The model also accommodates non-linear educational pathways, recognizing that foster youth may enter higher education at different stages of life. We encourage policymakers and institutions to adopt and adapt the FYCSI model to enhance support for foster youth nationwide.

Conclusion

POISED FOR GREATER IMPACT

Education opens the door to higher earning potential, life stability, personal fulfillment, and full participation in society. Since 2015, the **Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)** has provided flexible financial aid and holistic support tailored to the unique needs of post-secondary students with foster care experience. As demand for the program continues to grow, FYSA remains committed to dismantling systemic barriers that prevent any current or former foster youth from enrolling in and completing college.

As documented in the 2024 Rockefeller Institute evaluation, FYCSI increases educational attainment for system-impacted youth. Over the past decade, public funding has made it possible for thousands of students in New York State to access post-secondary education through FYCSI, demonstrating the program's effectiveness and transformational power.

“ The Foster Youth College Success Initiative is the reason why I am graduating with honors this May with my associate’s degree in human services. I used the extra funding for books, school supplies, and bills. Now, I am more confident in my financial ability to pursue my bachelor’s in social work this fall. This program gave me a second chance at college, and I will forever be grateful.”

“ FYCSI has been instrumental in my college journey, especially during a time when I wasn’t receiving financial aid. Their support allowed me to continue my education despite financial setbacks.”



SOUND INVESTMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

Despite confirmed positive outcomes, recent funding allocations have not kept pace with program growth or inflation. FYCSI now supports more students each year, but allocates fewer real dollars per pupil due to current appropriations and rising costs. Without increased investment, participant stipends will continue to erode, potentially affecting future results.

The FYCSI *Impact Study* findings underscore both the urgency and value of continued investment in higher education for these young people. As financial aid is stretched thinner, and housing, food, and transportation costs continue to rise, many FYCSI recipients must work full or part-time jobs while in school, take on additional debt, or cut back on essentials just to get by.

Stabilizing per-student support is a top priority to help foster youth cover expenses and remain in school. Low-income college students consistently struggle to bridge funding gaps on their own, which threatens their ability to persist and earn their degrees.

Every student deserves the chance to succeed in school and in life. To build on 10 years of positive progress, campus administrators, child welfare agencies, and legislative leaders must continue working together to provide programs that support the educational aspirations of youth in foster care.

“ I appreciate FYCSI being available to me. It’s helped foster youth who have aged out like me and do not have the support system of parents and family to rely on, like other college students do.”

“ Your program has eased the burden of trying to figure out how I can pay for college.”

“ This very extraordinary program was a light in a time of darkness in my life. I can't say that I'm there yet, but I'm very close to reaching the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Appendix

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RESOURCES



STUDY DESIGN NOTES

Data Cleaning Technical Process

Analysts from the Children's Aid Office of Performance Management (OPM) cleaned study data across several iterations, first removing “incomplete” responses (as identified by SurveyMonkey) and then fraudulent responses.

A “fraudulent response” was defined as:

- Multiple responses from the same person or Internet Protocol (IP) address.
- Responses from IPs originating outside the U.S.
- Responses from suspicious Internet Service Providers (ISPs).
- Responses that were started within 30 seconds of a previous response (due to significant spam detected).
- Responses to free-response question (FRQ) with suspicious content.

To assess IP/ISP information, OPM analysts used a bulk IP lookup site and an IP address fraud-detector website.

A “suspicious” response to a free-response question (FRQ) was defined as:

- Surveys with null responses for all three FRQs.
- Duplicated responses and phrases.
- Responses with suspicious capitalizations and punctuations that implied the use of web-scraping.
- Identification of non-human language (i.e., AI-generated). AI-generated language was detected using both an online tool and the analyst’s judgment.

OPM’s data cleaning of fraudulent responses is imperfect for the following reasons:

- Survey respondents may have used ChatGPT or other AI tools to synthesize their thoughts.
- There can be human error in detecting AI-language.
- Duplicate IPs belonging to different survey respondents are possible.
- Removing responses received within a 30-second window may remove some valid respondents.
- Removing respondents with all three FRQs left as null may have unintentionally excluded some valid respondents.

To minimize data cleaning errors, the final list of survey respondents was cross-checked against a list of individuals that the FYSA Policy team confirmed as legitimate through external means. As a result, eight survey respondents were returned to the sample pool and included in the final analysis.

Appendix

Design Strengths

The inclusion of free-response questions proved to be a significant strength of the study design. Allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences provided deeper insight into the ongoing challenges foster youth face while pursuing higher education, as well as the ways in which FYCSI funding helped alleviate financial and structural burdens. These qualitative responses were particularly valuable in identifying key pain points within the FYCSI process, including delayed awareness of the program, while also underscoring the critical role FYCSI plays in enabling students to remain enrolled. Notably, many responses suggested that without FYCSI support, continued enrollment and degree completion would have been significantly compromised.

Limitations

Following OPM's data cleaning procedures to exclude fraudulent and incomplete responses, the final analytic sample comprised 130 survey participants. While this sample offers valuable insight into participant experiences, its size was insufficient to generalize findings to the broader population of FYCSI funding recipients.

Additionally, the sample's geographic distribution was heavily skewed toward New York City, with 72% of respondents residing in the city, 26% elsewhere in the state, and 2% outside New York State. Because New York City students also have access to *College Choice* program funding (through the NYC ACS), the distinct impact of FYCSI funding is most clearly observed among students outside of the city—particularly, those attending SUNY institutions and eligible private colleges and universities.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on identified study limitations, future research should prioritize data collection from a larger, more geographically diverse sample, with greater representation of recipients outside New York City. This approach will yield a more comprehensive assessment of educational attainment outcomes attributable to FYCSI support.

Future research also should build on these findings by examining additional dimensions of participant experiences in greater depth. Given the frequency with which childcare-related needs emerged in free-response data, further investigation into the proportion of FYCSI recipients who are parents would be an important demographic to assess. Additionally, future studies should more directly assess the extent to which FYCSI funding influences degree completion, including measuring how many recipients believe they would have been unable to complete their degrees in the absence of this support.

Acknowledgments

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- Higher Education Services Corporation
- State University of New York
- City University of New York
- NYS Education Department
- NYS Office of Children and Family Services
- NYC Administration for Children's Services

SPECIAL THANKS

- NYS Governor's Office
- NYS Assembly Education Committee
- NYS Assembly Higher Education Committee
- NYS Senate Education Committee
- NYS Senate Higher Education Committee
- Yolanda McBride
- Jessica Maxwell
- Jasmine Hooper

FYSA also recognizes the many contributions of legislative leaders, academic institutions, program partners, youth advocates, foundations, and other champions across New York working to close the educational opportunity gap for young people in foster care.



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