

## *Students*

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# California Community Colleges Help Foster Dreams

## Former wards of the state now have advocates at public institutions

By MARY ANDOM

When Henry Gutierrez aged out of the California foster-care system a year ago, he thought, "What next?"

He had dreams of one day attending Harvard Law School and becoming a district attorney in California.

But just getting to college seemed complicated. His social workers and teachers encouraged Mr. Gutierrez, 19, to go, but he didn't know the steps to get there. A couple of friends from his group home attended Los Angeles Pierce College, so he decided to enroll there.

Choosing classes, taking placement tests, applying for financial aid — the pressure was so overwhelming that Mr. Gutierrez wanted to quit.

"A few times, I was thinking ... damn, this a lot to take care of," he says.

He got some help from a new program at Pierce designed to help former foster kids not only to enroll but also to make it to graduation.

The program is part of the statewide Foster Youth Success Initiative, which this fall placed liaisons at all of California's 109 community colleges. The liaisons serve as advocates, helping foster youth tap into resources such as scholarships, housing, and life-skills programs.

Many states now offer financial assistance in the form of scholarships or tuition waivers to former foster children.

In 2001, Oregon adopted a tuition-scholarship program for youth who have been in foster care for at least 12 months between ages 16 and 21, and who enroll in an Oregon state college or university. At the University of Texas at San Antonio, a joint outreach program with Casey Family Programs, a Seattle-based national advocacy group, links foster youth with federal TRIO programs for low-income, first-generation students. And for two decades, Florida has offered

tuition waivers to foster youth at its state universities. Until age 23, the students are also eligible for services that help them become independent, such as a stipend to cover living expenses.

Former foster children face almost insurmountable obstacles when it comes to making the transition from the foster system to higher education. At the age of 18, people emancipated from the system often lack the financial resources and life skills to survive on their own and are at high risk of becoming homeless, incarcerated, or victims of violent or sexual crimes.

Of the 80,000 children in California living in foster care, about 4,000 age out of the system each year, according to a 2006 study at the University of California at Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research. And the rates of foster youth attending college are dismal. Nationwide, less than 50 percent complete high school and less than 10 percent enroll in college, according to research from the Casey Family Programs. Of those who do attend college, less than 1 percent graduate.

"The expectations for foster youth to be fully functioning adults at 18 is unrealistic," say Michael McPartlin, of the City College of San Francisco.

Marco J. De La Garza, dean of student services at Los Angeles Pierce College, decided to become a liaison for the Foster Youth Success Initiative after attending two days of training last February.

In a room full of financial-aid counselors, social workers, and foster-youth advocates who discussed the dismal statistics on access and retention, the biggest shock to Mr. De La Garza came from the students themselves.

"They told us what we were doing wrong. It was basically everything," he says. "We came in with the assumption that somebody in the high school or home told them what to do. But for many of them, they didn't have years to plan for college. They decided yesterday."

Mr. De La Garza heard stories of students living in hotels or out of their cars while dealing with the difficult transition to adulthood. When financial-aid counselors were thinking about getting them special grants, foster youth were thinking about how to survive the next day.

"They said things like, 'We don't have a home; we have a bed. We don't have an address; we have a mailbox,'" Mr. De La Garza says.

The bureaucratic nature of admissions and financial-aid offices make it even more important to have foster-youth advocates within the system, he says.

He noticed that some former foster children at Pierce were paying out-of-state fees when they were in-state residents. Financial-aid applications require California residents under 19 to provide their parents' information. But some foster youth left that answer blank.

Mr. De La Garza also helped prospective students write letters to their employers requesting W-2 forms for their financial-aid applications. And when the students struggled to pay for books at

the beginning of the quarter, Mr. De La Garza told them about the state's Independent Living Skills Program, which reimburses foster youth for textbooks. The students, however, didn't have money to pay for the books upfront, so Mr. De La Garza found the cash. He then walked the students to the bookstore.

## **Reaching Out**

The City College of San Francisco was one of the first California community colleges to make a coordinated effort to reach out to foster youth. In 2003 the college became part of the Guardian Scholars project, which began in 1998 at California State University at Fullerton and provides academic assistance and emotional support to foster youth at many colleges and universities in the state. At that time, only 20 former foster children attended the college. Since the program started, that number has grown to 103.

Michael McPartlin, a Guardian Scholars project coordinator at the college, said housing, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of resources make it difficult to reach out to this sometimes-invisible population.

"We are trying to address a host of societal ills. That can't happen in one meeting," Mr. McPartlin says.

Stephanie Ortega, another project coordinator, knows all too well the struggles of being young and independent.

At 15, Ms. Ortega was left alone when her sister, whom she lived with, left the state to attend the University of Pennsylvania. Ms. Ortega never entered the foster system because her father, who lived in another state, supported her financially.

After graduating from high school, Ms. Ortega attended the University of California at Santa Barbara, where she majored in law and society. She now helps foster youth in San Diego County through the Guardian Scholars program there. She says she finds that admissions guidelines often don't apply to foster children and that financial-aid counselors are not well versed in the language of the foster system. With so many agencies working with foster youth, she says there is a tug of war between organizations whose roles often overlap.

"You have the court system, social workers, admissions, financial aid. It is hard getting everyone aligned and working together," Ms. Ortega says.

Still, she says, foster children's biggest challenge is that "they were never taught to ask questions from people who they perceive as an authority." She knows of students struggling in class who would go to the tutoring center, only to turn back when someone at the front desk did not acknowledge them.

The stigma of being a former foster youth, Ms. Ortega says, can be debilitating.

Mr. Gutierrez, for one, says that growing up in the foster-care system made him feel secluded from the world. His greatest challenge was building self-esteem and realizing he could accomplish his goals.

"You don't feel like you are worth much — it's the toughest part to deal with," he says. "I had to have the good things about me pointed out to me."

Now, in his first semester at Pierce, studying political science, Mr. Gutierrez is juggling a full-time job at a Sears marketing center and a full load of classes. But the hard work, he says, is satisfying.

"If it weren't for that program at Pierce, I wouldn't have quit, but it would have made it harder," Mr. Gutierrez says. Since the inception of the Foster Youth Success Initiative, Mr. De La Garza has seen similar small successes.

At first only a handful of students arrived at Mr. De La Garza's office. By word of mouth, that handful turned into a dozen. Mr. De La Garza believes the foster-youth population may be in the hundreds at Pierce College, and he has realized that they have their own network.

"They hang outside our office," he says. "It's becoming crowded."

Mr. De La Garza enjoys knowing that he is reaching out to more students. He just hopes the college is preparing them for the next step in life.

"The foster kids are bright, they are survivors," Mr. De La Garza says. "We will help them do things. But eventually they need to learn these skills on their own."

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