

## Foster Youth Transitions

### THE BEGINNING

In 2014, Riverside City College (RCC) used Student Equity funds and a grant from the Anthony & Jeanne Pritzker Family Foundation (AJPPF) to develop the Guardian Scholars program and later the Guardian Scholars engagement center for foster youth transitioning into college for the first time. The foster youth specialist teamed with external partners to build seamless transitions between high school and community college; between community college and various support networks outside the college; and between community college, four-year universities, and career resources. The Guardian Scholars program places an emphasis on community, making sure it is a one-stop shop for students, with a dedicated staff person working by the motto “I may not have all of the answers, but we’ll find them together.”

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*—Jeremy Johnson, RCC Foster Youth Specialist*

### IMPLEMENTATION

The Guardian Scholars program staff include a counselor/foster youth specialist who manages the program and works closely with the foster youth resource specialist working at local high schools to support students through the transition process. They began small, working to build partnerships across the community and developing a point of contact for all students coming from the K-12 system to RCC. When the Guardian Scholars program received funding from AJPPF to develop the Guardian Scholars engagement center, they were able to build a place where students could connect with program staff, study, meet with other students in the program, grab food before and after class, and participate in the various community-building events planned throughout the semester. With the center, Guardian Scholars students have a home base on campus that is supportive and comfortable.

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## IMPLEMENTATION, CONT.

A major component of the program is helping to bridge various transitional gaps by creating a network of integrated resources for incoming, current, and former foster youth students that begins in high school, extends beyond community college, and incorporates many community support programs—both public and private— that facilitate access to housing, food, counseling, and academic support. The goals of the Guardian Scholars program are focused on developing a network for students:

- Make transitions to and from college as smooth as possible. Aid students with applications, matriculation, and financial aid, and connect them with resources when they graduate.
- Encourage incoming students to enroll in the Guardian Scholars learning community, a cohort of classes designed to connect students in their first semester. This cohort consists of college-level English, an English support class, and a Guidance course that focuses on career exploration.
- Support students throughout their college experience, building an education plan and helping them register for classes. The program covers the cost of books and supplies and connects students with other programs they might qualify for, such as EOPS/NextUp and the college and career planning tools of the California College Guidance Initiative.
- Build a sense of community on campus through an engagement center with study tables, computers, food, and a “home base” where they can study and socialize. They even host holiday meals and events such as pumpkin carving and Thanksgiving dinner.
- Provide a “warm handoff” from community college supporting students until age 26. If the students are still making progress on their educational goals, however, the program continues to support them even after they age out. Guardians Scholars also support students in their transition to four-year universities and in their career pursuits.
- Connect students to peer mentors to support their navigation of the college systems.
- Ensure emergency services such as emergency housing, car repair, and food services are available to students if they need it.

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## IMPLEMENTATION, CONT.

The key to supporting the Guardian Scholars students is in maintaining partnerships with local community-based organizations. The program has developed a range of partnerships to connect students with resources:

- United Way provides moving trucks and volunteers; A Sense of Home, a staging company, helps furnish apartments for transitioning students.
- Youth Opportunity Centers assist with employment services.
- Cal Fresh provides fresh groceries for students.
- Foster Nation provides a meal a day.
- RCC Health Services offers mental health therapy.
- Operation SafeHouse provides emergency shelter for students when needed and works to find permanent housing within 30 days of accessing the shelter.



## EXPANSION

In 2018, RCC partnered with Moreno Valley College and Norco College, the other two colleges in Riverside Community College District (RCCD), to create the Foster Youth Support Network (FYSN). This network developed a regional framework for interagency collaboration to support all foster youth across Riverside County as they transition from high school to community college. The FYSN supports each of the three colleges by providing resource specialists at all of the feeder high school districts. These resource specialists support high school students in preparing for college, accessing resources, exploring college programs, and completing the enrollment process. RCCD is now partnering with John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) and Career Ladders Project (CLP) to offer more dual enrollment opportunities to foster youth in the feeder high schools. Building off of RCC's work, the FYSN is able to connect all foster youth in the county to a program staff member at one of the District's colleges who can assist them with the transition to college if they elect to attend community college after high school.

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## STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Foster youth students are often navigating more uncertainties and greater challenges than the general student population, so they benefit from having a single place to go for all the answers rather than visiting multiple departments. The program takes a holistic approach to supporting each student as a unique individual with specific needs to ensure their success in college. Students leave the Guardian Scholars program with a deep knowledge of the value of college and the resources available to them. In the last year alone, the Guardian Scholars program has seen students transfer to UCLA and UC Berkeley.

“The engagement center helped me with having private access to a big group of peers who I can relate to in life. It helped me with my classes, from printing assignments to getting [tutoring]. It has helped me come out of my shell and learn how to open up and trust people. I look forward to going to campus . . . knowing I have a safe space to enter without any judgment.”

—Guardian Scholars Program Student

## EARLY OUTCOMES

RCC’s most significant successes are the connections forged between the various resources in the county, and seamlessly connecting resources into a single point of contact. The program supports approximately 200 students per semester. Jeremy Johnson, RCC Foster Youth specialist, shares the key to supporting foster youth, “Our net is spread far and we have a great connection with our community. We make transitions as seamless as possible.” Success is much higher when students feel part of a community. In 2018-19, 71% of Guardian Scholars students were retained between terms, compared with 57% of non-participating foster youth. Additionally, 88% of Guardian Scholars students received the Pell grant (financial aid award), compared with 51% for non-participating students.