



NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver Program: A Status Report

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**Prepared by the
Department of
Academic and
Student Affairs**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2018, NSHE launched the Foster Youth Success Initiative when the Nevada Board of Regents unanimously approved the Foster Youth Fee Waiver (*Title 4, Chapter 17, Section 13*). The fee waiver policy permits qualifying NSHE undergraduate students to register without being charged registration or certain laboratory fees, increasing access to college for certain students who have experienced foster care.

Shortly after the fee waiver approval, NSHE applied for and received three years of private grant funding from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, a national foundation that funds projects focused on improving wellbeing, economic stability, and educational opportunity for young people who have experienced foster care and other systems-involved youth. A large portion of the grant funding went toward hiring a system-level Foster Youth Ambassador to implement and coordinate the initiative and its fundamental fee waiver component across NSHE's seven degree-granting institutions.

This report provides an overview of the fee waiver and the Nevada foster care population, highlighting the need for dedicated postsecondary education preparation, transition, and persistence support—in the form of both financial assistance and wraparound support services—for Nevada students who have experienced foster care. It also provides information on the NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver policy requirements, recipients, and cost, as well as a high-level overview of the NSHE Foster Youth Success Initiative grant-funded activities and accomplishments. This includes key efforts to learn from NSHE students who have experienced foster care and milestones in the statewide initiative's progress.

NSHE FOSTER YOUTH FEE WAIVER

Implementation

In September 2018, NSHE launched its systemwide Foster Youth Success Initiative when the Nevada Board of Regents unanimously approved the Foster Youth Fee Waiver (*Title 4, Chapter 17, Section 13*)—making Nevada the 29th state to implement a college registration fee assistance program specifically for college students who have experienced foster care. The fee waiver policy permits qualifying undergraduate students attending any NSHE institution to register without being charged registration or certain laboratory fees.

In approving the Foster Youth Fee Waiver, the Board contributed in an impactful way to the primary overarching initiative goal, subsequently outlined in the NSHE Foster Youth Success Initiative Strategic Plan, of building a more comprehensive, sustainable, and permanent education support system for Nevada students who have experienced foster care—from secondary education completion, to postsecondary education attainment, to a career path—which was collaboratively developed by NSHE and community partners throughout the state.

Initial Eligibility Requirements

To initially qualify for the NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver, a student must meet all four program requirements provided in Board policy:

- In foster care in Nevada at the age of 14 years or older;

- Graduated from high school or passed the TASC, HiSET, or GED;
- Completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); and
- Under the age of 26 years.

Requiring fee waiver-eligible students who have experienced foster care to complete the FAFSA means that those students will be able to access federal financial aid and other need-based institutional aid, in addition to receiving the fee waiver. This ensures that these students have the funding to not only support their college education, but also to alleviate other living costs associated with attending college (books, room and board, etc.).

Continuing Eligibility Requirements

A student need only complete the fee waiver application form and submit it to the institution's Admission/Registrar's Office once. If the institution determines the student is eligible for the fee waiver, the student must meet the following two requirements for continuing eligibility:

- **FAFSA** – complete each year; and
- **Satisfactory Academic Progress** – meet Title IV financial aid satisfactory academic progress requirements at their institution.

Satisfactory Academic Progress is a term typically associated with the federal Pell Grant and indicates the successful completion of coursework toward a degree or certificate. Requiring that students meet Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements ensures that students are on track to achieve their educational goals.

Recipients and Cost

Since the fee waiver policy was approved in Fall 2018, a coordinated statewide network that includes NSHE System Administration, NSHE institutions, and community partners, has been working diligently to raise awareness of the fee waiver program throughout the state. The total cost of the fee waiver for the first entering student cohort, for the 2018-19 academic year (Year 1), came in at \$104,393, with 38 fee waivers awarded to NSHE students. In Year 2 (2019-20), when a greater number of students who have experienced foster care learned about the availability of the fee waiver, the number of fee waiver recipients more than doubled: 78 fee waivers were awarded with the combined systemwide cost totaling \$237,096. And, in Year 3 (2020-21), the number of fee waivers awarded increased to 90, with the cost totaling \$332,895 across the system (Tables 1 and 2).

NSHE FOSTER YOUTH FEE WAIVER: YEARS 1, 2, & 3

Table 1: Total Dollars

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
UNLV	\$42,336	\$75,026	\$120,023
UNR	\$26,866	\$82,140	\$116,974
NSC	\$5,565	\$6,916	\$13,495
CSN	\$19,449	\$46,644	\$51,184
GBC	\$1,151	\$0	\$0
TMCC	\$7,484	\$17,928	\$24,843
WNC	\$1,541	\$8,442	\$6,376
Total	\$104,393	\$237,096	\$332,895

Table 2: Total Number of Students

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
UNLV	10	14	21
UNR	5	12	17
NSC	2	2	4
CSN	13	31	31
GBC	1	0	0
TMCC	6	13	12
WNC	1	6	5
Total	38	78	90

Note: dollar totals are based on actual—not rounded—figures, and therefore may differ if using the rounded figure only.

College registration fee assistance programs specific to students who have experienced foster care are becoming increasingly common nationwide. Nevada was the 29th state to implement such a program. As of 2021, there are now 35 total states that have some form of statewide postsecondary education financial assistance dedicated to this population: 24 states have a statewide registration fee waiver, four states have state-funded grant programs, and seven states have state-funded scholarship programs (University of Washington, 2021). At this time, concrete data showing the return on investment for these fee waiver programs is limited. However, for Texas, where a registration fee waiver for students who have experienced foster care has been in place since 2009, data shows that those students are three-and-a-half times more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree if they utilize a registration fee waiver than students who do not use the fee waiver, controlling for waiver eligibility, demographic characteristics, and academic performance. This was based on a six-year graduation rate data analysis of a cohort of students who had experienced foster care in Texas and who turned age 18 in fiscal year 2010 (Watt & Faulkner, 2020). Given the current nationwide dearth of return-on-investment data on registration fee waivers for students who have experienced foster care, NSHE has the opportunity to help lead the way in this area.

Knowing that capturing the return on investment for the fee waiver is critical, NSHE's Department of Academic and Student Affairs—which now oversees the Foster Youth Success Initiative—created a plan to improve future systemwide data collection on students who are utilizing the fee waiver. Building upon the current annual fee waiver data on total dollars awarded and total number of students awarded, NSHE will begin tracking student completion measures, including persistence and graduation rates. This expanded data collection effort will enable the system-level foster youth ambassador and institution-level faculty and staff directly serving students with foster care history to continuously improve services for NSHE students who have experienced foster care. It will also position NSHE and its institutions to potentially pursue future internal and external funding opportunities to support initiative work and reach the level of wraparound support needed to assist these students with thriving in college.

BACKGROUND ON THE NEED FOR DEDICATED SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED FOSTER CARE

Nevada Foster Care Population

Nationwide, children enter foster care due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment by their families. During any given year, in Nevada, there are nearly 5,000 children and youth in foster care. In Fiscal Year 2019, the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services reported an average of 4,749 children and youth in out-of-home care, the vast majority (an average of 3,292) being Clark County dependents. Washoe County had an average of 837 dependents and the rural region (which comprises the remaining 15 counties) of had an average of 416 dependents (State of Nevada Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Child and Family Services, 2020, p. 5).

Education Opportunity Gap

Students with foster care history are more likely than their non-foster care peers to struggle academically, due to factors including trauma, basic needs deficiencies, foster care placement and/or school changes, school transportation issues, and biased disciplinary practices (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2014; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2008). Consequently, Nevada's education system faces academic achievement and graduation rate disparities for students who have experienced foster care. According to [Nevada Report Card](#) data, the overall statewide high school graduation rates were 83.2 percent in 2018, 84.1 percent in 2019, and 82.6 percent in 2020. In contrast, the graduation rates for students who have experienced foster care were 46.5 percent, 44.2 percent, and 50 percent, respectively—far below those of the general student population (Nevada Department of Education, 2021).

College enrollment and graduation rates for students who have experienced foster care are very low, due to the lack of financial and wraparound assistance that students with stronger support systems can more readily access. As far as the general population, 62.7 percent of 2020 American high school graduates, ages 16 to 24, were enrolled in colleges/universities in October 2020—down from 66.2 percent in the prior year, likely due to COVID-19 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). As of 2020, 37.5 percent of U.S. adults, age 25 and over, ultimately earn a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In contrast, the most recent factsheet released by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education indicates, depending upon U.S. region, 70 to 84 percent of 17- and 18-year-old American youth in foster care express a desire to go to college, but only 31.8 to 45.3 percent of youth in foster care who graduated from high school successfully enroll in some type of postsecondary education program. And only three to 10.8 percent of students with foster care history attain a bachelor's degree (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018).

Students who have experienced foster care and successfully enroll in college are more likely than their peers without foster care history to delay their postsecondary education enrollment and to enroll part time because of financial concerns and the competing pressure to earn money to support themselves. They are also more likely than their peers without foster care history to need remedial or corequisite support courses, due to the education gaps and challenges they experienced because of the unstable and unpredictable nature of foster care (Gross, 2016). These setbacks in their postsecondary education path are correlated with the limited opportunities and support that students who have experienced foster care face; and these obstacles make it challenging for them to thrive

and persist in college. Moreover, even though the vast majority of students with lived experience in foster care report a very low income on the FAFSA and qualify for the maximum Pell Grant award, it is still a struggle to afford the full cost of attendance (COA), which includes books and living expenses not covered by the fee waiver.

NSHE FOSTER YOUTH SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Grant Support

As a result of the Board's approval of the Foster Youth Fee Waiver and the subsequent establishment of the Foster Youth Success Initiative, NSHE applied for and received a private, one-year \$200,000 grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation to assist with hiring a system-level Foster Youth Ambassador to implement and coordinate the initiative and its key fee waiver component across the seven degree-granting institutions. The Foundation then awarded NSHE an additional two-year \$400,000 grant, to sustain system-level fee waiver implementation and initiative coordination support for its institutions, along with awarding \$30,000 to TMCC and \$200,000 to UNLV, to strengthen formalized support for their students who have experienced foster care.

Mission

The primary mission of the initiative is to more effectively recruit, support, and retain students who have been dependents of the child welfare system; and the NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver is a key component in achieving that goal.

The ambassador, in collaboration with a coordinated statewide network that includes the NSHE institutions and community partners who serve young people who have experienced foster care, is dedicated to achieving the initiative's mission through a three-pronged approach:

1. Increasing financial aid access and utilization for all NSHE students who have been in foster care—particularly in the form of the Foster Youth Fee Waiver, state and federal grants, Federal Work-Study, scholarships, and/or education vouchers.
2. Improving and expanding postsecondary education-specific wraparound support for Nevada students who have experienced foster care, by:
 - a. Assisting all NSHE institutions with implementing processes and designing/coordinating campus-based support tailored to aid this student population with enrolling and succeeding in college; and
 - b. Supporting community partners in gaining an understanding of college processes, procedures, and resources (including financial aid and campus-based support services), including foster care-specific information and broader information that promotes student success.
3. Leading or supporting state and federal policy advocacy efforts that serve the educational best interests of Nevada students who have experienced foster care, such as drafting letters for the chancellor to send to elected officials and identifying opportunities for the chancellor to sign onto letters in support of public funding and other resources that support students who have experienced foster care with thriving and advancing in their education paths.

Progress

The foster youth ambassador facilitates a statewide learning community committed to achieving the initiative's mission. The ambassador serves as the primary point of contact for—and liaison between—NSHE institutions and community partners, working in collaboration with student leaders who have experienced foster care, child welfare agencies, school district officials, legal services providers, and other stakeholders who are well-versed in the unique challenges and needs of this underserved population.

2019 Initiative Outcomes

At the outset of the initiative, the ambassador launched a [website](#) to get the word out about activities and resources. The ambassador also launched a [Twitter account](#) for the statewide initiative. Another early emphasis was to engage first-hand with students who have experienced foster care, which led to then-Chancellor Thom Reilly hosting two regional Nevada Foster Youth Roundtable Discussions during Fall 2019. From these discussions, 14 key recommendations addressing postsecondary education access/success barriers were identified for Nevada education and community providers. The student feedback from the roundtable discussions was then used to inform the development of the first initiative strategic plan.

Also during Fall 2019, NSHE hosted the first annual NSHE Foster Youth Success Initiative Retreat, during which over 30 educators/providers and five students worked collaboratively to build a more cohesive statewide learning community focused on supporting students who have experienced foster care in accessing and thriving in college, including the development of the NSHE Foster Youth Success Initiative Strategic Plan. Finally, an NSHE delegation attended the California College Pathways Blueprint for Success Conference, a nationally-renowned, biannual event focused on supporting students who have experienced foster care with postsecondary education success.

2020 Initiative Outcomes

To accomplish the initiative's objective of providing students who have experienced foster care with the support needed to flourish, it is important to identify and serve any student in that category, regardless of fee waiver eligibility. This is critical for the purposes of accurately tracking key data, increasing fee waiver utilization, and connecting students to resources/services. To this end, the foster youth ambassador worked with institutional presidents and registrars during the first half of 2020 to add a standardized foster care identification question to admission applications. The question was fully implemented by all institutions in time for the Fall 2021 admission cycle. The ambassador worked with the institutions to identify and serve these students through targeted outreach efforts. NSHE also launched the Nevada Fostering Higher Education Support Network, which includes a core group that meets quarterly through a statewide committee. Additionally, TMCC implemented its \$30,000 Walter S. Johnson Foundation grant, focusing on housing stability and peer mentorship.

Other 2020 initiative efforts included developing the [Nevada Fostering Higher Education Financial Aid Toolkit](#), facilitating an expert panel on best practices for campus-based support, hosting a second annual retreat, establishing the Peer and Community Educator role, launching an [Instagram account](#), developing a quick-reference financial aid overview and FAFSA instructions for students with foster care history, and securing one-time approval (due to COVID-19) to reallocate grant

funds directly to students. NSHE also partnered with Together We Rise to secure and execute their own Walter S. Johnson Foundation grant, specifically serving Nevada students with foster care experience through their limited-time COVID-19 Rapid Response program. The partnership began in Fall 2020 and funding for unmet needs was dispersed through July 2021.

2021 Initiative Outcomes

In addition to sustaining the various initiative efforts begun in the prior two years, NSHE worked with a contractor during late 2020 and the first half of 2021 to create statewide promotional videos that will effectively inform young people in foster care, and their personal and professional support people, about the initiative—including the fee waiver component and the developing campus-based wraparound support services—in order to improve the secondary-to-higher-education pipeline.

The Peer and Community Educator and the Foster Youth Ambassador also conducted a systemwide needs survey that NSHE students who have experienced foster care were invited to complete from December 2020 through June 2021. The survey collected information about key barriers that have negatively impacted students' ability to persist in their college education, including core issues associated with the barriers and what would be helpful in addressing them. The survey results are being used to guide NSHE's efforts to support its students who have experienced foster care.

In Spring and Summer 2021, the NSHE campuses continued to build on their initiative efforts. UNLV launched NSHE's first full-time position and campus-based support program serving students with who have experienced foster care. Utilizing the \$200,000 in funding support from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation secured in 2020, and an initial internal funding commitment of \$108,762, UNLV established the Fostering Scholars Program Coordinator position and began providing formalized wraparound support services for UNLV students with foster care history. Likewise, UNR invested internal funds in a 2021-22 Graduate Assistant position dedicated to serving first-generation college students, including students who have experienced foster care. UNR was also invited to submit a Letter of Inquiry for a two-year \$200,000 grant through the Foundation, based on their targeted internal efforts to formalize and expand support for students who have experienced foster care. The Letter of Inquiry will be reviewed in late August and, if approved, UNR will be invited to submit a formal grant proposal to the Foundation.

Additionally, from April 2021 through July 2021, NSHE utilized some of its private grant funding to pay for a specialized virtual 16-week [Fostering Success Coach Training](#), for 20 NSHE employees and community partners.

STUDENT VOICE: FEEDBACK FROM NSHE STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED FOSTER CARE

Following are comments from NSHE students across the system who benefited from the Foster Youth Fee Waiver.

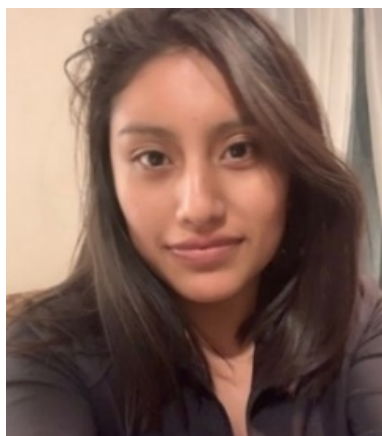


“The nursing program is accelerated and rigorous, prohibiting me from working enough to adequately fund my expenses. The fee waiver alleviated this concern by allowing me to focus on my courses and clinicals instead of feeling stressed about affording classes...Without the help of the fee waiver, along with my own integrity and sense of responsibility, I would not have had this incredible opportunity to choose my dream career.”

- Mary R., UNLV – Bachelor of Science in Nursing

“The Foster Youth Fee Waiver was an important factor in my decision to pursue a college degree. Despite being a strong student, I did not even decide to apply for college until the month before I graduated from high school because I did not think that I could afford it. But then, I found out about the fee waiver and changed my mind just in time...The fee waiver made college possible for students like me, who would literally not be in college without it.”

- Electra C., UNR – Bachelor of Science in Business Administration



“I was ineligible to complete the FAFSA or receive federal financial aid, I was unable to access the funding that some current/former foster youth receive, and I was ineligible for the fee waiver before I became a Permanent Resident. After becoming a Permanent Resident, the fee waiver and other financial aid resources I was able to receive relieved some financial stress...The fee waiver is giving me the financial support I need to continue my education, because it covers my course fees and frees up other financial aid for critical living expenses that are difficult to cover without working excessive hours and sacrificing study time.”

- Daysi M., NSC – Bachelor of Science in Business Administration

"The fee waiver allows me to use other financial aid more effectively to cover school supplies and living expenses, so that I can focus on studying and completing my education without having to work more than one job or struggle to cover necessary expenses like housing/ utility bills, groceries, and out-of-pocket healthcare costs. The fee waiver provides me with a strong and stable opportunity to achieve my academic goals and pursue my plan to become a pediatric nurse. Not only does it allow me to use more of my time to study, but it also helps me push myself to be a better student, future nurse, and dreamer."

- Dominic G., CSN – Pre-Associate of Applied Science in Nursing



"My biggest concern in pursuing my college education has always been the cost. Even with multiple forms of financial aid, the combination of expenses to cover classes, housing, transportation, food, and childcare has made financing my education challenging. When the fee waiver became available, my level of financial stress significantly decreased. It has been a tremendous help to relieve the pressure of everyday college finances, providing me and other students who have been in foster care with the opportunity to focus primarily on our education."

- Whitney J., TMCC – Associate of Arts (emphases in Human Development and Family Studies & Social Work)

"When I first started at WNC, the fee waiver was not yet an option, so the Pell Grant and the Chafee ETV funding were the only funding sources I had to help cover my academic and living expenses. That funding definitely helped. But, when you are a full-time student taking 4+ classes, it does not go far enough (even with a part-time income). So, for my first year or so at WNC, I only took 2-3 classes per semester...Having to minimize my college credits was a big disappointment for me, so I was very thankful when the fee waiver became available. It has benefited me by allowing me to reduce my work hours and attend school full time, which allows me to be more present at school, makes attending school less stressful, and provides me with more opportunities!"

- Miranda R., WNC – Bachelor of Social Work, through the WNC/UNR 3+1 Collaborative



CONCLUSION

As conveyed throughout this report, the NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver changed the landscape of postsecondary education opportunities for current and prospective NSHE students who have experienced foster care. Without it, many students conveyed that they would not have been in a position to pursue a college degree at all. While there is no doubt that the Board's approval of the fee waiver contributed in an impactful way to the initiative's mission, there is still work to be done. This report underscores the need for building robust, tailored campus-based wraparound support resources and services for these students. It also illustrates the need for more dedicated one-on-one postsecondary education preparation, planning, transition, and persistence support—outside of the higher education system itself—because it truly “takes a village” to provide the level of support needed for students to thrive. Fee waiver utilization more than doubled in the three years since its adoption. Therefore, tracking the return on investment is vital. Expanded systemwide data collection, including recipient persistence and graduation rates, will begin during the 2021-22 academic year. In addition to tracking return on investment, this data will enable the systemwide network to continuously improve services for NSHE students who have experienced foster care.

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APPENDIX: NSHE FOSTER YOUTH FEE WAIVER POLICY

Board of Regents *Handbook* Title 4, Chapter 17, Section 13

1. A student who was in the custody of an agency which provides child welfare services in Nevada after the student reached the age of 14 years may be permitted to register for credit without a registration fee or, except as otherwise provided, laboratory fee(s) if the student:
 - a. Has graduated from high school or obtained a general equivalency diploma or equivalent document;
 - b. Completes the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); and
 - c. Is under the age of 26 years.

A student placed out of state by a Nevada child welfare agency for the purpose of treatment or who was placed out of state through an Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) and did not achieve permanency with a family prior to the attainment of age 18 is eligible for the waiver.

2. This policy is applicable during Fall and Spring terms only.
3. State-supported academic credit-bearing courses that lead to a degree or certificate, including distance education courses, independent learning, and continuing education courses are eligible for the fee waiver. Self-supporting courses, including independent study and correspondence courses, are not eligible for waiver under this policy.
4. Laboratory fees associated with all courses numbered below the 300 level are eligible for waiver under this policy. Exceptions to the waiver of laboratory fees include:
 - a. Per semester fees, such as the Health Service fee;
 - b. Special course fees for purposes other than class supplies – including individual instruction, third-party charges, and special transportation requirements;
 - c. Fees for actual class cost in excess of \$100; and
 - d. Technology fees.
5. A person to whom the fee waiver is awarded shall be deemed a bona fide resident of Nevada for tuition purposes.
6. To remain eligible for the fee waiver, the student must meet institutional Title IV financial aid satisfactory academic progress requirements.
7. Registration fees associated with graduate level courses and with the William S. Boyd School of Law; the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine; the University of Nevada, Las Vegas School of Medicine; and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas School of Dental Medicine are not eligible for waiver under this policy.
8. Each institution shall designate a primary point of contact for questions concerning and administration of the fee waiver.
9. For purposes of this Section, “an agency which provides child welfare services” means such an agency as defined under NRS 432B.030.