

Promoting Degree Attainment Among Former Foster Youth:

AN EXPLORATION OF FLORIDA'S POLICIES,
PROGRAMS, AND PRACTICES TO IMPROVE
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR FOSTER YOUTH



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ABOUT HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to achieve a postsecondary education. Our work is driven by our four fundamental beliefs in Community, Equity, Investment, and Partnership, and we invest in initiatives across the full education continuum.

Through our Florida Regional Student Success Initiative, Helios is helping undeserved, minority, and first-generation students from the state's large population centers in Miami, Orlando, and Tampa achieve a postsecondary education.

In Arizona, where Latino students comprise the largest percentage of the K-12 public school population, the Foundation is implementing its Arizona Latino Student Success initiative focused on preparing all students—especially students in high-poverty, underserved Latino communities—for success.

Dear Colleague,

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to enriching the lives of individuals in Arizona and Florida by creating opportunities for success in postsecondary education. Although communities at large benefit from increased educational attainment, specific populations—including foster youth—stand to gain exponentially more.

Helios is aligned with Florida’s Higher Education Coordinating Council’s proposed state attainment goal, which calls for 55 percent of the state’s working-age adults to possess a high-quality certificate or degree by the year 2025. In order to achieve this goal, all students—those that come to postsecondary education via traditional routes as well as those that experience alternate paths—must be supported in order to experience the transformational power of education. While challenges abound for all students, foster youth enter postsecondary education with particular disadvantages. This education brief explores both the overt and implicit challenges faced by Florida’s foster youth as they aspire to enroll in college and complete a postsecondary degree.

Through our Florida Regional Student Success initiative, Helios Education Foundation invests its knowledge, expertise, and resources to elevate the educational achievement of all students—particularly first-generation, minority, and underrepresented students—in the state’s populous metropolitan areas of Tampa Bay, Orlando, and Miami. As a foundation invested in Florida’s future and the future of the Florida’s students, we hope this brief not only enlightens, but also challenges leaders to support one of the state’s most vulnerable populations, foster youth, in the pursuit of higher education.

Sincerely,



Vince Roig
Founding Chairman



Paul J. Luna
President & CEO

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to enriching the lives of individuals in Arizona and Florida by creating opportunities for success in postsecondary education. Helios supports initiatives that address the multitude of challenges students face across the education continuum.

Educate Tomorrow, an organization committed to providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth, exemplifies the mission and values of Helios. Recently, Helios and Educate Tomorrow began a partnership to explore data related to the postsecondary opportunities available to Florida students preparing to “age out” of the foster care system. Together we wanted to understand the programs and support available to these students. Additionally, we wanted to identify any trends or impacts that these policies and practices may have upon postsecondary persistence and completion.

The goal of this brief, authored by researchers at Educate Tomorrow and Helios, is to share preliminary findings regarding the opportunities available to youth in the Florida foster care system, as well as data trends around their implementation. It is our hope that legislators, leaders at institutions of higher education, and community organizations will use these findings to promote strategies and practices designed to increase the overall postsecondary attainment of Florida’s youth from foster care.

THE PROBLEM

The transition to adulthood is difficult for any adolescent; however, youth in the foster care system face additional challenges, especially related to postsecondary education. According to a recent report by the Education Commission on the States, only 46% of youth from the foster care system graduate from high school, compared with 82% of students from the general population (Parker & Sarubbi, 2017).

Unfortunately, this discrepancy in high school graduation translates to approximately 20 percent of former youth from foster care enrolling in college as opposed to 66 percent in the general population (Current Population Survey, 2017). Three percent to 11 percent of alumni from foster care complete a degree from a four-year university, compared with 32 percent for students from the general population (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018).

Not surprisingly, less education translates to lower wages and a higher likelihood of unemployment, compared to that of the general population. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study found that more than a third of former foster care youth live below the poverty line as adults (Pecora,

2005). Because of these challenges, many states, including Florida, have sought to implement policies and practices to support the postsecondary education efforts of this resilient, yet often highly disadvantaged, population of students.

Initially, federal and state programs focused on helping students from foster care paid the direct costs of higher education, such as tuition and fees. Over time, however, there has been a shift both nationally and in Florida to adopt more holistic approaches to improve outcomes for youth from care. These approaches go beyond mere financial support and provide students with academic supports, peer networks, mentoring, and other supports around financial resources and housing.

This brief analyzes the extent to which Florida has implemented a 2013 statute (Florida Statute 409.1452) that required increased collaboration between the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Florida Department of Education (FDOE), the State University System of Florida Board of Governors (SUS), and the Florida College System (FCS).

FEDERAL LEGISLATION AND POLICY

While a majority of the states have created programs and policies to support students from foster care in higher education, many policies have been created in response to federal legislation that provides funding streams to the states. Currently, three main federally funded programs support youth in foster care as they work toward postsecondary credentials: (a) the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for a Successful Transition to Adulthood “the Chafee Program”; (b) the Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV); and (c) the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

JOHN H. CHAFEE FOSTER CARE PROGRAM

Originally passed as the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the goal of the Chafee Program is to help states improve the lives of foster youth by providing resources that help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care. Under this program, which provides grants to states and eligible tribes, \$140 million is allocated to the states each year and distributed based on the number of foster youth in each state. In exchange, states must provide plans to the federal government on how they will use the funding and make a 20% match (Nguyen, 2007).

THE EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING VOUCHER PROGRAM

In 2002 Congress expanded foster care educational support by adding the ETV Program to the Chafee Program. This program allows each state to provide vouchers of up to \$5,000 in one year to offset the costs of attending institutions of higher education (Nixon & Jones, 2007). While the maximum amount per person is \$5,000 per year, the actual amount awarded is based on unmet financial need and may be used for tuition, room and board, books, student loan repayments, and qualified living expenses (e.g., childcare).

FOSTERING CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS AND INCREASING ADOPTIONS ACT

Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act in 2008, allowing states the option to extend federally funded programs for foster youth who are at least 18 years old but who have not yet turned 21. This act impacts policies around a number of areas for foster youth and adopted children. One of its main benefits is that it extends some services to help young adults from foster care transition into adulthood. These services were expected to improve postsecondary enrollment opportunities for this population.

FLORIDA LEGISLATION AND POLICY

TUITION AND FEES

In 2002, with the passage of F.S. 1009.25, Florida began providing tuition and fee exemptions for students in foster care. The exemptions were good for 4 years, or 8 semesters, as long as the student maintained a GPA of 2.0 or higher. The Florida Legislature expanded the program in 2004 to cover all children adopted from the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) after May 5, 1997.

In 2010, after recognizing that many foster youth have difficulties completing higher education, the Florida Legislature extended the exemption to cover students until the age of 28. Under the current statute, students are required to make adequate yearly progress, but a minimum GPA is not required, and there are no restrictions on the number of credit hours or semesters (Florida’s Children First, 2014). While there is no minimum GPA for the exemption, students still must meet the requirements to be admitted and remain enrolled in the college or university.

EXTENDED SERVICES AND INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMS

After Congress enacted the Chafee Program and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, the Florida legislature followed suit by enacting its own state laws and policies to expand services for foster youth. Currently, the main program that supports their postsecondary education is Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS).

PESS services are provided for foster youth who have already graduated from high school or earned a GED and are enrolled in a postsecondary or vocational school. Under PESS, Florida provides the student with a stipend of \$1,256 a month for living expenses up to the age of 23. Those eligible are allowed to live independently but must enroll in at least nine credit hours or the vocational equivalent.

WHAT ARE THE POLICIES, BEST PRACTICES, AND PROGRAMS BEING USED IN FLORIDA TO SUPPORT POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR FOSTER YOUTH?

A small percentage of youth from the foster care system use the tuition and fee exemption to access and complete postsecondary education. To help address the low postsecondary educational success rate among students from foster care, 409.1452F.S. was enacted to require collaboration between the Department of Education and DCF. According to this statute:

The State University System of Florida and the Florida College System shall provide postsecondary educational campus coaching positions that will be integrated into Florida College System institutions' and university institutions' general support services structure to provide current and former foster care children and young adults with dedicated, on campus support. The Department of Children and Families has the sole discretion to determine which state college or university will offer a campus coaching position, based on departmental demographic data indicating greatest need (F.S.409.1452).

As a result of this legislation, each college and university took steps to identify an individual on their campus to serve as a “foster care liaison.” All of Florida’s 28 colleges and 12 universities have designated an individual to serve in this position. Six colleges and universities have at least one dedicated coaching position. One college and one university have two full-time dedicated student support professionals in place to serve as the main point of contact for the students and guide them to specific wraparound services.

Although the identification of a campus coach was an important first step, by 2014 it became apparent to stakeholders, based on best practices in other states, that a supportive network should be established to guide this work. Therefore, volunteers from the private and public sectors, in collaboration with the DCF, established Florida Reach in 2014 to support the full-time work of a DCF staff member charged with leading the College Coach Project. In 2016, in an effort to establish a formal mechanism by which to collaborate with the Florida Department of Education, as mandated by F.S.409.1452, DCF contracted with Educate Tomorrow to administer the Positive Pathways Program. The goal of the Positive Pathways Program is to improve postsecondary educational outcomes for former foster youth eligible for the tuition and fee exemption by providing technical assistance, research, and opportunities for collaboration to members of the network. Several Educate Tomorrow staff members are paid part-time to administer a network comprised of students, paid professionals, and volunteers throughout Florida. Educate Tomorrow acts as a backbone organization to coordinate, develop, and maintain a network comprised of campus-based professionals.

The next section will identify and describe the most important supports of on-campus college coaching programs. We then identify and highlight the six universities and colleges in Florida that have developed systematic programs for foster youth. Finally, we will conclude the section by identifying additional scholarship and financial supports that have been put in place to support foster youth.

INCORPORATING BEST PRACTICES INTO INTENTIONAL HOLISTIC SUPPORTS

Holistic supports for young people from foster care include: assisting students in admissions, such as transitioning into campus life; priority academic and financial aid advising; identification and referrals to resources, including safe and stable housing; and well-being and employment opportunities, including internships. The college coach regularly connects the student to many of the supports.

Early identification is also critical to make an intentional transition from high school to college. Colleges and universities should have a clear means to identify students prior to enrollment, in order to offer them support.

Dedicated college coaches, who have expertise in postsecondary education systems and social work or counseling, are essential. Using a trauma-informed lens, college coaches provide students with access to priority advising, mentoring, innovative funding opportunities, and other critical components that promote student well-being. Through advising and mentoring, students discuss their life goals, plan realistic steps needed to reach goals, including anticipation of potential challenges. They also have the guidance they need to pick appropriate courses and a degree-track that matches career goals (Kinarsky, 2017).

As a result of their involvement with the campus-based programs, students build relationships on campus with staff and other peers, which makes students feel like they belong and helps to boost their confidence in navigating the college or university system. To make peer support relationships intentional, some programs, including Educate Tomorrow at Miami Dade College, the Knight Alliance at UCF, Unconquered Scholars at FSU, and Fostering Panther Pride at FIU, have on-campus peer mentoring models in which higher level college students guide their peers in navigating the college system. Often, peer mentors earn monthly stipends to work with the college coach. These positions provide financial support in the form of a paycheck and professional training for upper-level students.

In addition to mentoring and guiding students, the college coach serves as the liaison between students and other support mechanisms, including emergency, progress, and completion scholarships. For example, at several institutions college coaches working with this population connect students with innovative financial assistance from community donors, including the AOK Scholars Program.

The AOK Scholars Program, sponsored by the Lawrence E. White Foundation, provides students with the following: an allocated amount of emergency funding for each semester; a good grade bonus at the end of each semester for students who have earned at least a 2.3 GPA; and completion awards once students earn their associates, bachelors, or graduate degrees. To be eligible, students need to have earned at least nine credits already, be enrolled in at least nine college-level credits, and be using the DCF tuition exemption.

FLORIDA'S CAMPUS-BASED SUPPORT PROGRAMS—SIX MODELS LEADING THE WAY

Given that the legislation related to college coaching positions supporting former foster youth was effective in 2014, the efforts of various colleges and universities are still in early stages, limiting the amount of research available to determine the programs' effectiveness. While some programs have begun collecting data on persistence and completion, most of these studies are still in the early stages of development.

Six of Florida's 28 colleges and 12 universities have taken additional steps to create dedicated programs supporting students who use the DCF tuition exemption. While the specific components of each program vary, a unifying thread across programs is the dedicated college coach who provides at least some, if not all, of the services identified above.



EDUCATE TOMORROW AT MIAMI DADE COLLEGE



The Educate Tomorrow at Miami Dade College (MDC) Program, for current or former youth in and from foster care and in other disadvantaged situations, currently serves more than 400 students. The program is a campus–community partnership

created in 2013 with funding from Educate Tomorrow, a Miami–based 501c3 organization, and grants from several community organizations.

Two full–time student support professionals, who have master’s degrees in social work and counseling, serve as single points of contacts for students throughout the college’s eight campuses. To help foster youth still in high school transition to college, the MDC coaches participate in Unite Miami, a collaborative partnership funded by The Children’s Trust of Miami Dade County that strategizes and provides wraparound care coordination for high school students transitioning to post–secondary educational opportunities.

In 2016, the program won the Service Year Alliance Innovation Grand Prize, for its wraparound approach to supporting foster youth. And in 2017, MDC students involved in the program began participating in the Educate Tomorrow Abroad Program, a partnership with Delta Airlines.

FOSTERING ACHIEVEMENT FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM



Tallahassee Community College’s (TCC) Fostering Achievement Fellowship Program (FAF) assists 44 foster youth to transition from a structured foster care program to life on campus. Students from foster care sign up for the program through

a competitive process that has served more than 100 students since the program began in 2011. Support for students comes in many forms, including regular individual and group meetings, the creation of educational plans, and connections to resources both within the TCC community and the Tallahassee community at large.

UNCONQUERED SCHOLARS



Established with 20 students in 2012, the Florida State University (FSU) Unconquered Scholars Program now provides over 100 FSU students annually with an array of services to promote academic and life success for

students who experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward–of–the–State status.

As part of FSU’s Center for Academic Retention & Enhancement (CARE), the Program has served approximately 200 students since its inception with one–on–one advising, college life counseling, mentoring, tutoring, financial aid assistance, mental health counseling, as well as academic and skills workshops. Many Scholars gain admission to FSU using the alternative admissions process available through CARE, which provides college access for low–income and first–generation students.

Students also have access to a state–of–the–art computer lab, study suites, small class sizes, a food pantry, a professional clothing closet, and volunteer opportunities coordinated by the program’s staff. A full–time Program Director provides continuous one–on–one, strengths–based support. Any issues that threaten overall student well–being, success, and retention, including, but not limited to, problems with housing, food insecurity, health issues, and connecting to the campus community are addressed as effectively and quickly as possible. By proactively addressing internal and external barriers to success, the Program makes progress toward personal and academic goals more achievable.

In 2016, *University Business Magazine* awarded Unconquered Scholars a “Model of Excellence” award, in large part for its record of accomplishment of retaining 91 percent of its students who earned an average grade point average of just over 3.0. Today, the six–year graduation rate for Unconquered Scholars stands at 85 percent, with 100 percent of graduates securing full–time employment or graduate school enrollment within one year of completing their degree from FSU.

KNIGHT ALLIANCE NETWORK



UNIVERSITY OF
CENTRAL FLORIDA

At the University of Central Florida (UCF), the Knight Alliance Network (KAN), which was established in 2014, provides support for students who are transitioning out of foster care to help them achieve academic success.

The program is led by a full-time

director and employs part-time peer workers who provide resources to help students develop leadership skills and a survivor mentality, and to learn coping mechanisms to adjust to campus life.

KAN students not only are provided a set of wraparound services, they are also part of a program that provides both semester-by-semester and annual recognition for academic success and improvement, as well as community engagement and leadership.

EDUCATE TOMORROW AT FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY (FAU)



The Educate Tomorrow at Florida Atlantic University Program (Educate Tomorrow at FAU) is a campus support program designed for students who

have experienced foster care and/or homelessness. The program, which has grown from 14 to 70 active students since it was created in spring of 2017, established a single point of contact responsible for providing holistic academic support from pre-admission to after graduation. The program provides tailored academic success coaching that consists of advisement and referrals to campus resources. Staff use the Appreciative Advising model, an intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions to help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their educational goals.

Led by a full-time college coach under the auspices of the Division of Academic Affairs, Educate Tomorrow at FAU assists students with the on-boarding process to FAU. The coach also ensures that students are informed about important policies, opportunities, and resources that support student persistence and academic success. The coach serves as a referral agent to key departments, such as Admissions, Financial Aid, Controller's Office, Dean of Students, Housing, and New Student Orientation, each of which has designated a contact for the campus coach.

Once a student is admitted to FAU, the coach serves as his or her primary point of contact and aims to provide a holistic service model to positively influence the academic performance of students. Students involved in Educate Tomorrow at FAU are connected to high impact practices throughout their time at FAU. Eligible activities include mentoring, access to special populations and first-generation support programs, career resources, and certificate programs.

FOSTERING PANTHER PRIDE



Florida International University's Fostering Panther Pride (FPP) program offers tailored academic and support services to students identified as formerly in foster care or homeless. Launched in 2013,

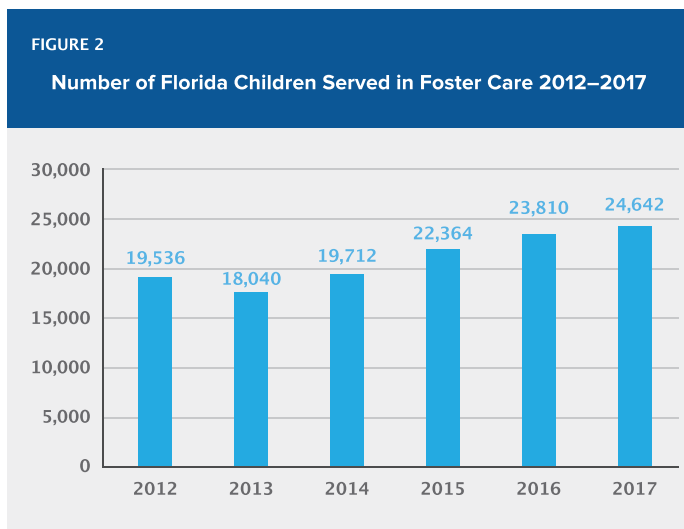
with a challenge grant from Educate Tomorrow and with support from a number of community partners, FPP assists students in their transition to FIU, their retention and graduation, and their pursuit of employment or graduate studies upon receiving their bachelor's degree.

A full-time program director and a success coach serve as primary contacts to provide students with a support system and help them navigate university processes pertaining to admissions, financial aid, registration, housing, as well as accessing institutional resources (e.g., academic advising, tutoring, counseling services, career development services) for academic and professional development. In addition, students are paired with FIU faculty, staff, and alumni mentors who serve as guides through their academic journey. Along with these supports, students are also eligible for: housing scholarships and book stipends; access to a food pantry, school supplies and move-in packages for first-time residents; peer guides who aid incoming students in navigating college life; personal, professional, academic, communication and financial development workshops; tutors and assessments to support student success; meetings to identify their academic needs and to develop an academic success plan; and faculty/staff/alumni mentors to reinforce the creation of strong social networks, which build self-efficacy.

FPP has served more than 300 students since it first began, and currently serves more than 120 students from foster care and adopted homes.

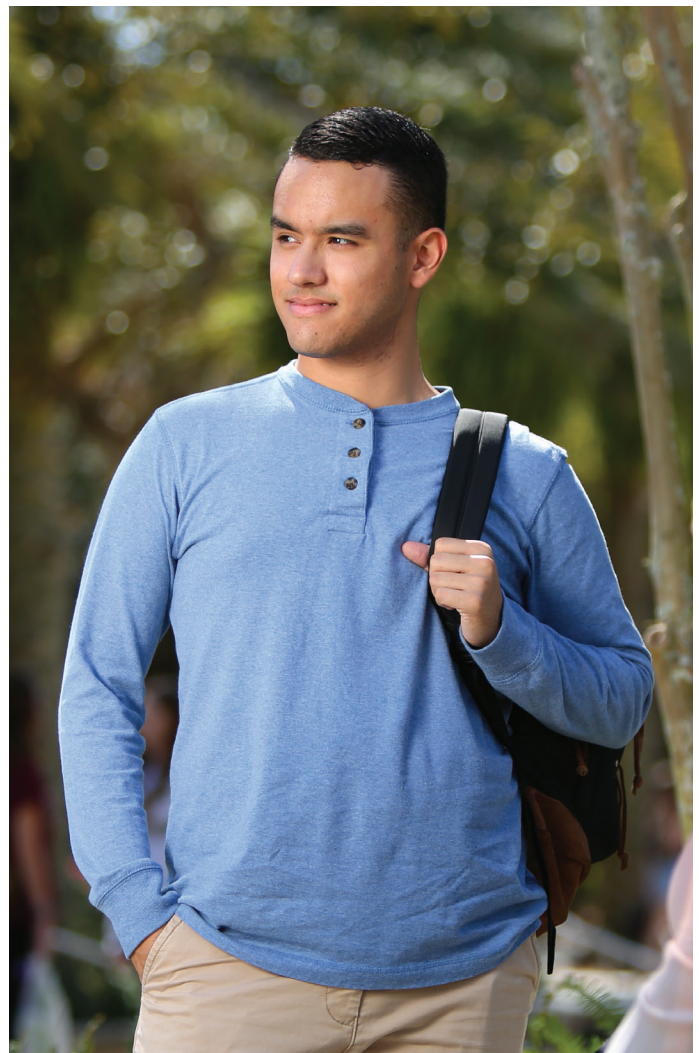
WHAT DATA TRENDS ARE AVAILABLE FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN FLORIDA?

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, 437,465 children are in the foster care system across the United States. Comparatively speaking, slightly more than 24,000 children in Florida receive foster care services, and the number has been rising (Figure 2). Each year, approximately 1,000 youth turn 18 and age out of foster care in Florida. These are the young adults who should, if possible, be pursuing postsecondary education toward self-sufficiency.



Source: AFCARS, 2018

Throughout the years, both the United States Congress and the Florida Legislature have made efforts to support foster youth as they pursue various postsecondary options. Despite evidence suggesting some success of these programs—increasing numbers of foster youth gaining access to postsecondary education—the details of the actual impact of state or federal programs are still unknown. A recent article highlights the challenges of the relationship between foster youth programs and postsecondary success. According to Dworsky (2018), “There is no national tracking and reporting system for the ETV program and state data on the receipt of tuition waivers or ETV funds, including graduation rates, are either difficult to locate or not available”, (p. 15).



Because not all of the programs are fully developed, it is important for there to be a statewide network available to coaches, mentors, advisors, and tutors to support collaboration and consistency in process.

WHY DON'T WE KNOW MORE ABOUT IMPACTS ON UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT FOSTER YOUTH IN FLORIDA?

In our analysis of foster youth programs and policies in Florida, we ran into many of the same problems that have been identified nationally. Oftentimes, important data pieces are not collected or reported in ways that would be the most useful to stakeholders, including legislators and university or college presidents. Sometimes comparisons can be hard to elucidate because “foster youth” and “adopted youth” may be lumped under the same category for tuition exemption.

Given these limitations, our data are organized around three specific questions: 1) How many students are receiving tuition and fee exemptions in Florida’s colleges and universities? 2) What are the racial/ethnic breakdowns of foster youth in Florida’s colleges and universities? And 3) What trends do we see in graduation of foster youth in Florida’s colleges and universities?

Results are further broken down into two categories: the Florida College System and the State University System of Florida.

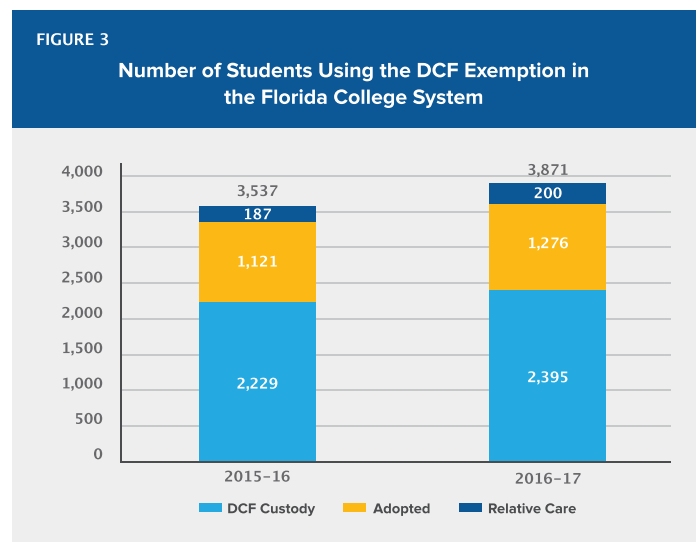


HOW MANY STUDENTS ARE RECEIVING TUITION AND FEE EXEMPTIONS IN FLORIDA COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?

FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM ENROLLMENT

In 2008, 1,100 students within the Florida College System utilized the tuition and fee exemption provided by DCF. Since then, the number of students using the exemption has more than tripled, indicating greater access and opportunities for former foster youth and young adults who were adopted from foster care. By the 2016–2017 school year, 3,871 emancipated and adopted youth used the tuition fee waiver in Florida’s 28 public colleges.

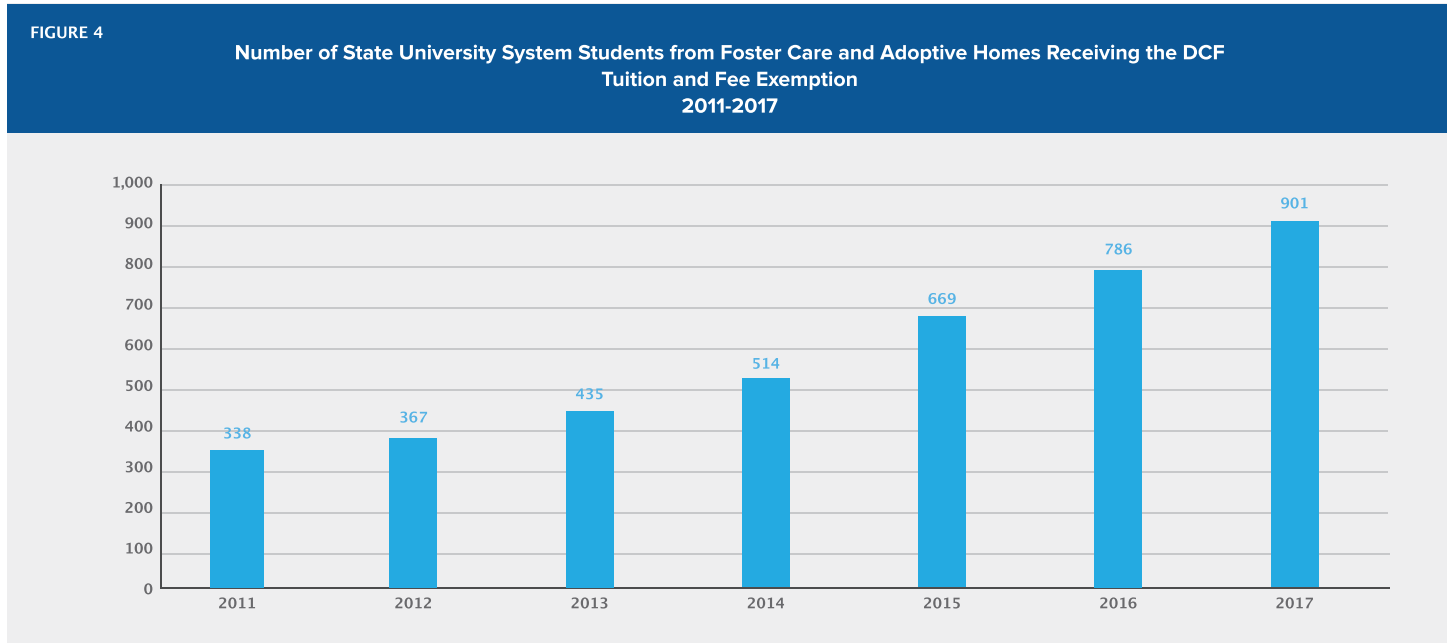
Figure 3 shows the number of students in the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years that used the waiver in the Florida College System. The number increased from 3,537 to 3,871, a 9% increase. Table 1 in the Appendix, shows the number of foster youth using the exemptions at each of the 28 public colleges in Florida.



Source: Bureau of PK–20 Education and Reporting, Florida Department of Education

STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF FLORIDA ENROLLMENT

Florida's public universities have also seen a steady increase in the number of students using the DCF tuition and fee exemption. Figure 4 shows the number of students from foster care and adoptive homes who used the exemption within SUS each year, from 2011 to 2017. In 2011, 338 tuition and fee exemptions were used. By 2015, the number had reached 514 and since then has continued to rise, with 901 students using the exemption in 2017. These numbers represent a dramatic 167% growth in enrollment, much higher than the growth rate of the general undergraduate student population of the SUS, which was 8% during the same six-year period.



Source: Florida Board of Governors, 2018

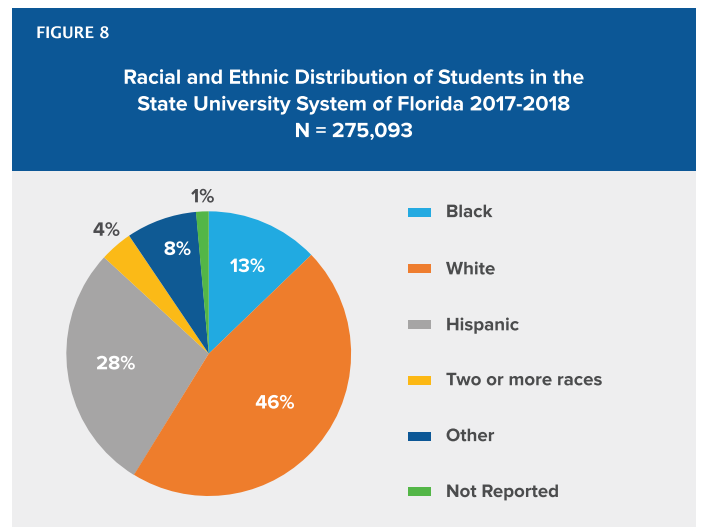
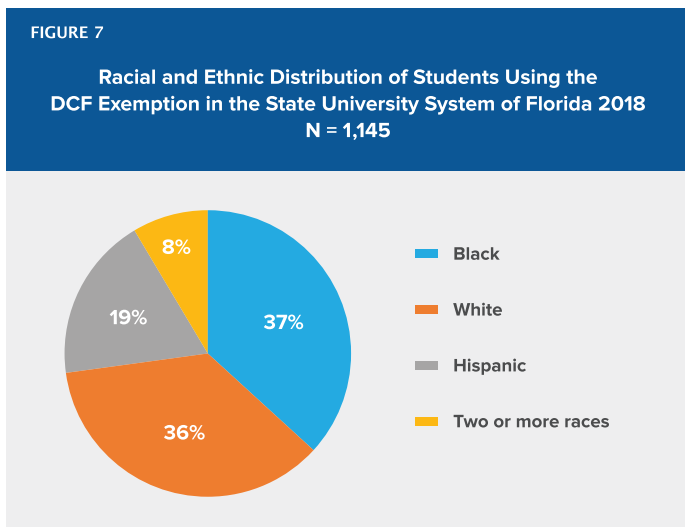
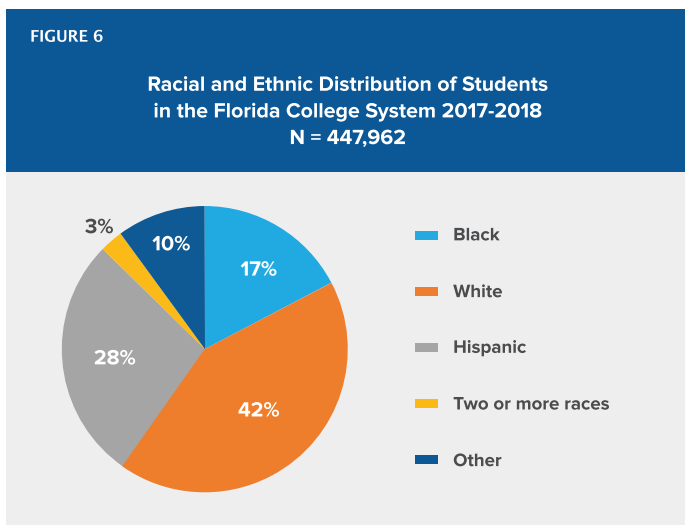
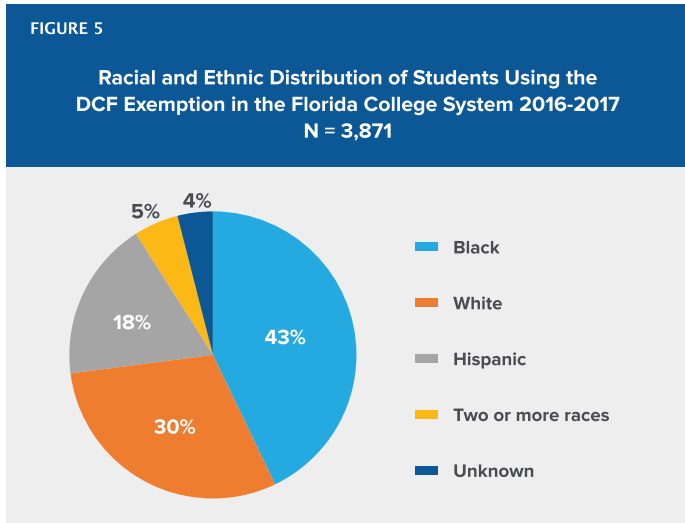
WHAT ARE THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC BREAKDOWNS OF FOSTER YOUTH IN FLORIDA'S COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?

FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM ENROLLMENT

Figure 5 shows that 70% of the students using the DCF tuition exemption in the FCS are people of color or multiracial, compared to 48% of the general population of students in the FCS (Figure 6). This data indicates that compared to the general student population, Black students from foster care are 22% more likely to enroll in a Florida public college, an encouraging statistic.

FLORIDA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM ENROLLMENT

Similar to the FCS, Black students are overrepresented in Florida's public universities, due to the opportunities afforded by the DCF tuition exemption and the support available to them once they arrive on campus. Figure 7 shows that 64% of the students using the DCF tuition exemption in the SUS are people of color. In comparison, 44% of the general population of students in the SUS are people of color (Figure 8), a 20% difference.



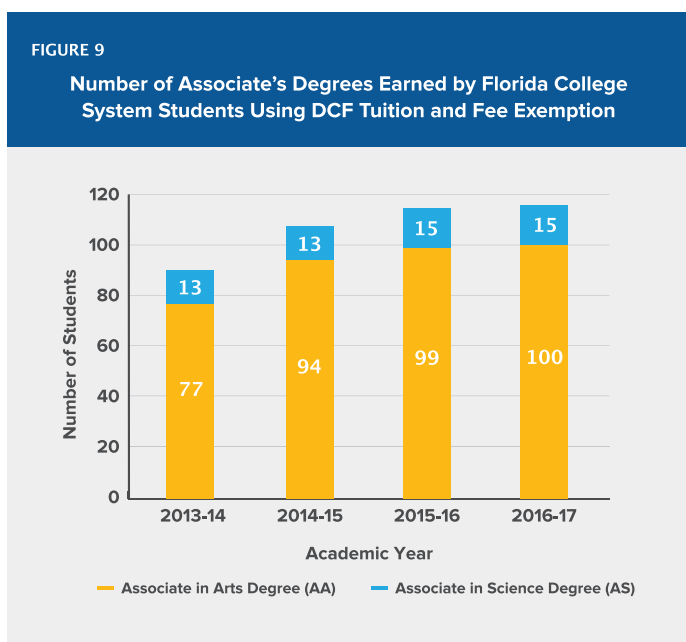
Source: Bureau of PK-20 Educate and Reporting, Florida Department of Education

Source: State University System, 2018

WHAT TRENDS DO WE SEE IN GRADUATION OF FOSTER YOUTH IN FLORIDA'S COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?

FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM COMPLETION AND GRADUATION

The FCS reports that 164 students using the DCF tuition and fee exemptions graduated with degrees or certificates from Florida public colleges during the 2016–2017 academic year, which is the most recent year that data is available. Figure 9 shows the growth in number of graduates using the exemption increased 28% between the 2013–2014 school year and the 2016–2017 school year (from 90 to 115).

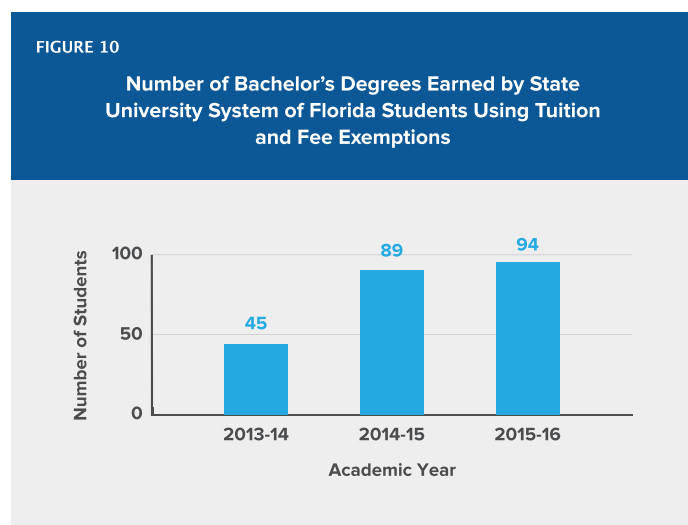


Source: Bureau of PK–20 Educate and Reporting, Florida Department of Education

Note: These figures do not include students who were adopted from foster care or were in relative or non-relative care.

STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF FLORIDA COMPLETION AND GRADUATION

Data from the State University System, between 2013–2014 and 2015–2016 show the number of former foster youth who earned a degree increased from 45 to 94 (a 109% increase), while the number of students in the general population who obtained a bachelor's degree increased roughly 5% over the same time period (See Figure 10).



Source: State University System of Florida, 2013–2014 to 2015–2016

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO IMPROVE THE SUPPORT OF FOSTER YOUTH IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN FLORIDA? WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS CAN SUPPORT INCREASED ATTAINMENT FOR FOSTER YOUTH?

STATE POLICY LEADERS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD ENSURE THERE IS A DEDICATED COACH FOR FOSTER YOUTH ON EACH APPROPRIATE COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUS.

Opportunity: While Florida passed legislation requiring “postsecondary educational campus coaching positions that will be integrated into Florida College System institutions’ and university institutions’ general support services structure to provide current and former foster care children and young adults with dedicated, on-campus support,” the state of Florida has provided limited funding to support statewide initiatives.

Six colleges and universities have made a concerted effort to satisfy the legislative intent of F.S.409.1452. An additional 12 institutions have expressed a clear interest in starting similar programs on their campuses; however, funding remains the main obstacle. The annual statewide college coaching network currently consists of 300 individuals who engage in a monthly call and receive a quarterly newsletter.

Recommendation: To better support foster youth, we recommend that each college campus, with a sufficient number of students using the DCF tuition exemption, have a dedicated coach—a paid professional focused on foster youth—who can make sure that their students get enrolled, use their tuition exemption, access mentors, and know where to go for additional supports.

STATE POLICY LEADERS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD COLLABORATE TO IMPROVE CONSISTENCY AROUND THE PROCESSES AND USES OF THE TUITION AND FEES EXEMPTION AND OTHER POLICIES.

Opportunity: The state of Florida has some of the most pioneering policies and legislation dictating support of foster youth in the nation; however, deficits in implementation have led to barriers for students trying to use the exemptions. For example, some colleges and universities make students re-apply for the tuition exemption each and every semester.

Also, more clarity is needed around the types of degrees that the exemption can be used for in postsecondary education. Some college coaches reported that students were given contradictory information about being able to use the supports and tuition exemption for technical college certificates or graduate degrees.

Recommendation: To provide more uniform guidance to institutions serving students using the tuition exemption, state policy leaders in the Florida legislature and administrators in the FCS and SUS should identify and establish policies that are consistent across all institutions. This is particularly important for foster youth who often have a higher mobility rate than traditional students and therefore might be in and out of more colleges and universities.

INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD CREATE DATA SYSTEMS THAT IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR COLLEGE COACHES.

Opportunity: Florida is a big state with 40 public colleges and universities and multiple campuses within many of those institutions. At a 2018 conference and convening sponsored by Helios and DCF, it was clear that while college and university leaders are willing to support students from foster care, they rely on partnerships with child welfare professionals and other community education advocates and philanthropic organizations throughout their communities to provide extra support for these students. Without this collaboration, students eligible for the tuition exemption may be unaware of all their potential benefits and they may fall through the cracks. A lack of appropriate assistance may lead to students incurring unnecessary debt, failing courses or dropping out of college altogether.

Recommendation: To better support foster youth, institutions of higher education should collaborate with statewide agencies to create a data system that flags potential students when they enroll at any college or university. Once flagged, the eligible student's information can be immediately shared with the campus coach, allowing the coach to start supporting students as soon as they begin their postsecondary careers. To help provide a complete picture of the student's experiences and support needs, automated processes should be developed to transfer relevant student data from the child welfare agencies to the college or university system (Data Quality Campaign, 2017).

Not only will this data system help ensure students are taking advantage of the tuition and fee exemptions, but it will also secure their access to supports and resources that can increase their chances of completing their postsecondary work. Establishing a comprehensive data system would also allow the state of Florida to better monitor and track the effectiveness of their policies. At the institutional level, this data could also be used to recognize early-warning signals to prevent against risky behaviors. This data could also inform the college and university performance-based funding models that Florida recently instituted.

STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR A BACKBONE ORGANIZATION TO SUPPORT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SUPPORTING FOSTER YOUTH.

Opportunity: Structures within postsecondary institutions designed to support youth coming from the foster care system are relatively new. Initially, supports were primarily focused on free tuition. Over time, supports evolved to emphasize wraparound services that keep former foster youth in a postsecondary education setting until they graduate. The very few existing programs, however, were largely grassroots efforts, and required a great deal of support, collaborative guidance and technical assistance from distant partners and advocates. These grassroots efforts include 300 from throughout Florida who engaged in regular college coaching networking activities such as a monthly conference call, regional convenings, and an annual conference.

Recommendation: To better support foster youth, state policy leaders in the Florida legislature, DCF, and the Florida College System and State University System of Florida should identify an organization that is a trusted convener and collaborator with the knowledge and expertise to provide technical assistance, develop and analyze data, and lead advocacy, research, convenings, and collaboration efforts.

³ <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/roadmap-for-foster-care>

CONCLUSION

The number of postsecondary students using the DCF tuition and fee exemption in Florida has grown from several hundred to more than 4,000 during the past decade. This growth shows the commitment that the state of Florida has made to improve the lives of students from foster care and adopted homes.

Given the urgency of the needs among the resilient yet consistently vulnerable student population coming from foster care and adoptive homes, and the need to create better outcomes for these students, state policy leaders and/or institutions of higher education should prioritize the following:

- Ensuring there is a dedicated coach for foster youth on each appropriate college and university campus;
- Collaborating to improve consistency around the processes and uses of the tuition and fees exemption and other policies;
- Creating data systems that improve communication and support structures for college coaches; and
- Identifying a backbone organization to support institutions of higher education enrolling foster youth.



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APPENDIX

TABLE 1

FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM STUDENTS USING DCF TUITION AND FEE EXEMPTION

College	2016-17
Florida College System Overall	3,871
Broward College	377
Chipola College	10
College of Central Florida	71
Daytona State College	192
Eastern Florida State College	100
Florida Southwestern State College	102
Florida Gateway College	16
Florida Keys Community College	*
Florida State College at Jacksonville	264
Gulf Coast State College	44
Hillsborough Community College	282
Indian River State College	134
Lake-Sumter State College	35
Miami Dade College	400
North Florida Community College	*
Northwest Florida State College	39
Palm Beach State College	250
Pasco-Hernando State College	101
Pensacola State College	117
Polk State College	131
Saint Johns River State College	51
Saint Petersburg College	206
Santa Fe College	202
Seminole State College of Florida	128
South Florida State College	10
State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota	93
Tallahassee Community College	196
Valencia College	278

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2016-2017 Student Database.

Note: These numbers include adopted, relative-care and non-relative care students using the exemption.

TABLE 2

**NUMBER OF STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF FLORIDA STUDENTS FROM FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTED HOMES RECEIVING THE DCF TUITION AND FEE EXEMPTION, BY UNIVERSITY
2015-2016 & 2017-2018**

University	2015-16	2017-18
Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University	107	163
Florida Atlantic University	91	137
Florida Gulf Coast University	41	94
Florida International University	105	143
Florida Polytechnic University	*	*
Florida State University	68	96
New College of Florida	*	*
University of Central Florida	141	191
University of Florida	53	71
University of North Florida	33	54
University of South Florida	82	162
University of West Florida	64	71
Totals	785	1,182

Source: State University System of Florida, Academic years 2015-2016 and 2017-2018

Note: These figures include students who were adopted from foster care or were in relative or non-relative care.

TABLE 3

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT PROGRAMS SERVING STUDENTS USING DCF TUITION EXEMPTION AT FLORIDA PUBLIC POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

College/University	Program Name	Department	Year Founded	Staff	Funding Partner	Website
Florida Atlantic University (FAU)	Educate Tomorrow at Florida Atlantic University	University Advising Services	2017	1 FT, 1 graduate assistant	Educate Tomorrow	www.fau.edu/uas/educate_tomorrow
Florida International University (FIU)	Fostering Panther Pride	Office of Student Access & Success	2014	2 FT	Helios Education Foundation & FIU President's Council	sas.fiu.edu/fpp/
Florida State University (FSU)	Unconquered Scholars	Undergraduate Studies/Division of Student Affairs/Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE)	2012	1 FT, 1 intern	Helios Education Foundation & FSU Foundation	care.fsu.edu/USP
University of Central Florida (UCF)	Knight Alliance Network	Student Development and Enrollment Services/Multicultural and Support Services	2014	1 FT, 1 PT	University of Central Florida Foundation	mass.sdes.ucf.edu/programs/kan/
Miami Dade College (MDC)	Educate Tomorrow at Miami Dade College	Division of Student Services	2013	2 FT	Educate Tomorrow	www.mdc.edu/main/singlestop/educate_tomorrow_at_single_stop.aspx
Tallahassee Community College (TCC)	Fostering Academic Achievement Fellowship Program	Division of Student Services	2011	1 FT	Big Bend Community-based Care	www.tcc.fl.edu/student-life/student-services/accessibility-and-resources-center/fostering-achievement-fellowship-program/

Note: All programs are also supported by their institutions, in addition to funding partners.





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