

Advancing Advising Practices to Support Students Who Have Experienced Foster Care

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Abstract

This brief explores the crucial role academic advisors play in supporting students who have experienced foster care (SEFC). Drawing on recent research, policy reviews, and direct input from SEFC, advisors, and support practitioners, it examines the distinct educational challenges SEFC face as well as the institutional practices that can promote persistence and success. The brief is informed by insights from 28 practitioners across higher education and SEFC-focused support organizations. Data collection included one focus group ($n = 9$) and 19 one-on-one interviews. Participants included eight academic advisors and 20 professionals serving in SEFC support roles and organizations, with 10 contributors self-identifying as former SEFC. Together, these perspectives ground the findings in lived experience and day-to-day practice, offering actionable guidance for institutions seeking to strengthen advising support for SEFC. The analysis emphasizes practical approaches for advisors to deliver more focused and informed support, such as leveraging data to identify and assist SEFC, engaging in comprehensive professional development, mapping available resources and networks, enhancing student outreach and communication, and developing proactive direct support strategies. These recommendations highlight the need for institutions to remain responsive to students' evolving needs and prioritize equity in higher education. By integrating SEFC support across campus systems and positioning academic advisors as strategic change agents, colleges and universities can create more inclusive environments that improve enrollment, persistence, and transition to the workforce for SEFC. This publication offers actionable guidance for refining advising practices and campus structures, reinforcing that supporting SEFC is essential for both equity and institutional success.





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The Advising Success Network, an initiative of NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, provided funding to support this project. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of NASPA or its members. Publication of this information does not imply endorsement, agreement, or opposition to the views expressed. The accuracy of the content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information.

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Prologue

This brief aims to increase awareness of how advising can be effectively used to better support postsecondary students who have experienced time in foster care. Many terms can appropriately acknowledge this lived experience. *Foster youth* typically refers to young people currently still in the system, and *foster care alumni* is a commonly used term for those who have exited the system. While both terms most often reflect positive intent, there is increasing agreement both broadly in the field and with those with lived experience who served as contributors to this resource that *students who have experienced foster care (SEFC)* is a more person-centered and inclusive phrase. This neutral and descriptive term highlights the broad lived experience of individuals rather than defining them by it and can refer to both students currently in foster care and those who have left the system (Johnson, 2024). The term is intended to be viewed from an asset-based perspective, and *experienced foster care* is preferred because it places the individual first and acknowledges that foster care history is only one aspect of a person's life and not necessarily their distinguishing identity (Nadon, 2020).



The intentionality in this approach aligns with best practices for person-first language, which emphasizes the individual rather than a label or past experience, helping prevent stigmatization and affirming that people are more than their previous traumas (Thomas & Scharp, 2020). Additionally, this framing is especially relevant in higher education settings where students may be at different stages of involvement with the foster care system and along their academic journeys. The same level of care should also be used to not replicate harmful or stigmatizing labels for SEFC, such as “at risk,” “vulnerable population,” “high-needs,” “orphan,” or “ward of the state.”

SEFC should have the agency to choose the language that best reflects their identity and lived experience in direct interactions with various audiences, and their preferences should be prioritized whenever possible. Throughout this brief, *SEFC* refers to college students who have had any experience with foster care, regardless of duration, age, or context. While some sources may use more specific criteria to determine eligibility, this brief aims to be broadly referential for all SEFC seeking support on campus. Toward that end, this brief provides an overview of the SEFC experience, including relevant context and details about existing resources available to students and advisors. Additionally, the brief offers thoughtful recommendations for enhancing advising practices. It is acknowledged that there are many departments on campus and within communities that are vital to the wraparound supports for SEFC that are not the focus of this resource. The information in this brief is informed by the literature on SEFC and insights gathered via a series of interviews with SEFC support practitioners, advising professionals, and those with lived foster care experience. The quotes present throughout represent their thoughts and experiences. By sharing perspectives and recommendations, this brief strives to inspire meaningful improvements in advising approaches, ultimately fostering a more

supportive environment for this important student population. The goal is to serve as a starting point for ongoing conversations among educators and advisors, and to encourage the development of more nuanced and tailored advising strategies and collaborative efforts across diverse stakeholders that specifically address the needs of SEFC. Greater intentionality in addressing the unique needs of SEFC has the possibility to positively impact postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and workforce entry, underscoring that this work is not only an equity imperative but also an important driver of student success and institutional mission.

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The Status Quo: Persistence Challenges for Students Who Have Experienced Foster Care

Researchers and higher education professionals recognize that, despite best efforts and intentions, inequities persist for many postsecondary student groups. Students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) have been, and continue to be, an often-overlooked student population. These students have navigated varying duration of time in the foster care system, at different ages, and have lived a wide range of experiences as a result. They can face a myriad of compounding barriers to and through postsecondary education due to misaligned systems and shortsighted policies that negatively impact their persistence (Sarubbi, 2019; Stone et al., 2025). While it is challenging to identify the exact number of youth in foster care, the Adoption and Care Analysis and Reporting System 2023 report estimated there were 343,077 children in the child welfare system during 2023, with approximately 27% (or 91,000) individuals who were college-going age (Children's Bureau, 2023; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).



The high mobility of youth in care, coupled with limitations in the timeliness, scope and interoperability of data systems, make it difficult to accurately track the number of youth in care, and their educational outcomes (M. Gross & Baron, 2022). Despite this difficulty, current analysis of the literature confirms these students do experience measurably lower high school completion rates than their non-SEFC peers. The comparison becomes even more disparate when estimates show SEFC are five times less likely to complete any postsecondary credential than the general population (Okpych et al., 2025).

For system-involved students, estimates for achieving a diploma or GED range from approximately 69% to 85% compared to about 95% among their peers in the general population. While some sources suggest a national average as low as 50% completion (Okpych et al., 2025), more recent data and specific state figures show a range of high school persistence rates, all of which clearly demonstrate a need for focused efforts to increase overall secondary outcomes for SEFC. Factors such as frequent academic mobility, residential and relational instability (M. Gross & Baron, 2022), contribute to these lower rates. Academic transitions

are especially challenging for youth with foster care experience, who often endure frequent and disruptive moves between placements and schools (Kothari et al., 2021). These transitions interrupt learning, create gaps in academic progress, and can erode students' sense of self-efficacy. The lasting impacts are intensified by the absence of consistent adult support, the emotional weight of trauma, and the need to prioritize immediate basic needs over educational goals (Wagner & Heberle, 2024). Literature on the life trajectories for the more than 300,000 youth in foster care immediately after leaving the system, at ages 19-26¹ (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022), paints a difficult picture detailing increased rates of poverty (65%), homelessness (35%), unemployment (50%), teen pregnancy (60+%), and involvement in the justice system (45+%; Johnson, 2024; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Understandably, these possible outcomes² can create significant barriers for SEFC as they envision and pursue postsecondary pathways.

¹ In the United States, youth typically age out of foster care at 18, but many states offer extended foster care that allows young people to remain in care until 21, and in some states, up to age 23 to support education and transition needs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022).

² The data on these life outcomes vary widely, are estimates based on the literature offered on SEFC, and are not meant to be used to fully understand the totality of SEFC identity or stigmatize their experience.

Whether the data sufficiently capture the full picture of SEFC or not, and despite the tremendous barriers they may face, the reality is that **SEFC are highly resilient, persistent, and present at colleges and universities across the country.** It is essential to elevate these narratives of success while continuing to strengthen institutional supports. Addressing SEFC educational aspirations and outcomes is paramount for institutions looking to make good on their promises of equity and access. Some state systems and campuses have already met the call to support the unique needs of these students by establishing campus-based support programs that offer SEFC-specific resources. Some of these programs, including Guardian Scholars, Renaissance Scholars, and Next Up³, are national initiatives partnering with institutions, while others are independent campus programs run and led by various departments and institutional oversight. Each provides models for supporting college-going students with a lived history of time in foster care with mentoring, financial aid, and academic support (Gamez & Lopez, 2021; Okpych et al., 2025).

These vital SEFC programs often center on a holistic, individualized strategy that addresses students' unique needs, encourages collaboration within the institution, and secures resources through both internal funding and external grants or donations. They provide a wide range of support, including tutoring, mentoring, skills workshops, mental health services, community networks, and SEFC advocacy at large (Cheatham et al., 2021). They excel in direct personal counsel in navigating and providing financial aid, academic advising, case management, social and emotional support, and housing assistance—efforts students often cite as instrumental to their academic persistence (Gamez & Lopez, 2021). One interviewee with lived history in foster care shared, “I was part of a campus support program that specifically provided student mentors to former foster youth, and it made a world of difference—helped me navigate all the academic and social stuff.”

Students adamantly express that these networks provide wraparound supports to help them navigate their postsecondary pathways. Additionally, the best SEFC institution-based program models include ongoing training and coaching for program staff (Bennett, 2020; Bennett et al., 2020). These programs not only help students but can also be demonstrative

of strategic and equity-minded strategies for institutions to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation rates, particularly for historically underserved student populations such as SEFC, who are also more likely to be first-generation and students of color (Toms et al., 2023). However, expecting every institution, especially smaller and/or less-resourced ones, to run a dedicated SEFC program is impractical. Many colleges offer similar efforts, but these are often fragmented across departments,

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making them sometimes difficult for students to navigate. **Advisors are therefore essential. With knowledge of SEFC contexts, trauma-informed methods, and resource navigation, they can provide consistent ongoing support. Building advisor capacity is a scalable and effective strategy for improving outcomes where specialized SEFC programs are unavailable.**

The Role of Advising

Because of their proximity to students and connectivity across the institution, advisors are well-positioned to play an important support role for SEFC. Historically, advising has been the primary institutional function to offer enrollment and persistence guidance to students navigating their academic journeys, ensuring they understand degree requirements, and upholding academic standards. The field of advising now recognizes that students often require a broader range of care. In response, the role of advising has rapidly evolved from transactional methodologies to holistic student support models designed to meet the complex needs of today's diverse student body (Karp & Lyons, 2025). Advisors are moving from a passive, informational role to an active, supportive partnership that also encompasses counsel on issues of personal growth, career exploration, and navigating mental health or financial aid challenges (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Museus, 2021). With the guidance of inclusive professional frameworks, traditional academic “counseling” roles have expanded to include

³ More information on these programs can be found on each institution's website. Additional campus programs, such as TRIO and others, may also support SEFC via their resources for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students.

greater responsibilities, specialized expertise, and an increased emphasis on relationship-building and student support (Karp & Lyons, 2025).

Advisors play an integral function in providing one-on-one support to students, and their expertise in various education pathways, resource networking, and relationship-building skills can be particularly significant to SEFC success. The Advising Success Network's (ASN's) Evidence Base for Holistic Advising Redesign highlights the importance of students' lived experiences, cross-functional alignment, and differentiated student support for ensuring an equitable, high-quality, and effective advising redesign. These practices are critical for advancing student success broadly; however, specific refinements to existing approaches could yield an even greater positive impact for SEFC. While advising is a vital support pathway for students, there is a need for greater awareness about how engagements with SEFC could be better designed to be responsive to their unique needs.

Advisors have the potential to challenge the status quo by drawing on their institutional knowledge and professional resources, yet more deliberate efforts and directed professional development may still be needed. While advisors are not trained as human services providers and may not possess the

specialized credentials to address every need of SEFC, their impact can still be significant. Advisors often manage large caseloads, but with improved access to relevant information, specialized training, and strong institutional networks, they can make significant differences without fundamentally altering their roles. To provide the highest quality support, advisors must understand the specific challenges faced by SEFC and adjust their professional practices accordingly. One academic advising professional candidly shared, **"I don't know a lot about the specific needs for these students [who have experienced foster care], but I am deeply committed to learning and working to offer them the most informed advising I can."**

Supporting students with a history of foster care would be enhanced by ongoing, holistic professional development for advisors—moving beyond one-time trainings to integrated, continuous learning that informs practice.



Advancing the Impact of Advising

Current frameworks, such as ASN’s Advising Redesign Principles, offer important tools for mitigating negative postsecondary experiences among SEFC. These principles emphasize the centrality of students’ lived experiences, cross-functional alignment, and differentiated student support in creating equitable, high-quality advising engagements. The framework appropriately identifies advisors as critical institutional agents to support students in providing individualized consultation, sharing knowledge of diverse educational pathways, and leveraging cross-institutional resources to promote student success (Museus, 2021). This expertise, coupled with the knowledge of SEFC lived context and their experiences, has tremendous potential to positively impact these students’ success. It is clear that advisors can play an integral role as vital change agents in challenging that status quo by nuancing some of their existing strategies to cater to SEFC (Gray et al., 2024). Not only can these efforts positively impact SEFC persistence, but they can also be beneficial to students holding other often marginalized identities and make the institution more inclusive for all students.

Leverage Data to Identify and Support Students Who Have Experienced Foster Care

Advisors and institutional leaders should leverage multiple data points to gain deeper knowledge of the foster care alumni student population and tailor communications, outreach, and support services accordingly. Data can be instrumental in improving understanding of SEFC educational pathways and needs, particularly when multiple sources are used to triangulate information (Okpych et al., 2025). Systems like child welfare, human and health services, education, and workforce development can collectively offer a holistic view of the foster youth experience and help identify factors influencing college enrollment and completion rates. Efforts to integrate, or at minimum access deidentified datasets, could enable institutions to anticipate incoming class profiles and better inform outreach and support services accordingly (Okpych, 2024).

For example, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) captures critical information related to students’ foster care histories. Although these data are typically housed within financial aid offices, they are often not shared cross-functionally due to uncertainty regarding data-sharing authority. The majority of advisors who contributed to this brief noted gaps in information sharing related to SEFC enrollment

Foster care question on the 2025 FAFSA:

At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court?

Answer “Yes” to this question if at any time since age 13

- you had no living parent, even if you’ve since been adopted;
- you were in foster care, even if you’re not in it now; or
- you were a dependent or ward of the court, even if you aren’t now. (Federal Student Aid, 2025, paras. 2–3)

and emphasized that responsible data disclosure could enhance their ability to provide informed, high-quality advising.

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), financial aid offices may share information regarding a student's foster care status with academic advising under "Legitimate Educational Interest" guidelines. This allowance means FERPA permits disclosure of education records, including financial aid information, to school officials with a legitimate educational interest in reviewing these records to fulfill their professional responsibilities, including situations in which they provide services or support to a student (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). Providing academic support and resources specifically tailored for SEFC, such as through programs like Guardian Scholars, institution scholarships, and others, would likely be considered a legitimate educational interest, allowing for information sharing between financial aid administrators and academic advising.

Advisors are encouraged to build relationships with financial aid leadership to better understand what data may be accessible. Advisors can also leverage FAFSA data under legitimate educational interest to assist students with completing financial aid forms, filing appeals, or

Many SEFC may not mark their status on the FAFSA for a variety of reasons, including not understanding the questions, not wanting to disclose their lived experience, or not realizing there are designated resources for them. SEFC may be first-generation college students and may not have access to much of the information useful to the college transition (J. P. Gross et al., 2023), may not have help in filling out the FAFSA, or may not feel college enrollment is a reachable goal and skip FAFSA completion altogether (Carrasco, 2024). Furthermore, the application process can be intimidating, and so any assistance advisors can offer in understanding FAFSA implications could greatly benefit SEFC. While other application platforms, such as the College Board's CSS Profile or individual postsecondary systems' admissions portals, may also capture data related to SEFC status, the FAFSA is the most comprehensive data source on SEFC enrollment. Therefore, institutional leaders and practitioners, like advisors, should work to leverage that data to better understand potential student-level enrollment indicators (Gray et al., 2024).

Advising centers commonly use student intake forms and surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and the Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey to gather information about a student's background, goals, and academic concerns before or during the advising process. These forms help advisors connect students with resources, understand their strengths and challenges, and monitor their progress toward educational and career goals (Karp & Lyons, 2025). In addition to aiding with course selection, major exploration, and overall academic program planning, questionnaires like these can gather student information such as academic history, interests, strengths, study habits, and any areas of concern, and help advisors identify and connect students with appropriate institutional resources, support networks, and services (McCutchen, 2023). NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising emphasizes the power of intake forms or "Advisee Information Cards" as a useful tool to build rapport with students and guide the relationship between advising and students to generate the most success. Information such as personal background, interests, values, aptitudes, future plans, and advising expectations can help direct the support an advisor can offer.

Some institutions integrate these forms into a larger Banner system for monitoring and documentation (McCutchen, 2023). Scaffolding information sharing in this way can often lead

ORGANIZATIONS THAT OFFER FAFSA SUPPORT TO SEFC

- iFoster
- SchoolHouse Connection
- John Burton Advocates for Youth

maintaining Satisfactory Academic Progress, as these activities are related to the administration of aid (Farnsworth et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). While FERPA allows for disclosures without consent in certain cases, it is important to remember students still have the right to consent to the disclosure of their personally identifiable information. In essence, while the financial aid office can share this information with academic advising under FERPA's "legitimate educational interest" exception, seeking the student's consent before sharing this sensitive information is generally considered a best practice and empowers the student in their educational journey. Institutions should consider developing policies and procedures for sharing financial aid information with advising offices, ensuring compliance with FERPA and the Higher Education Act (Carrasco, 2024).



to broader wraparound supports for students. Other offices may hold useful student data, such as admissions, TRIO, student affairs, and institution-based support programs. Cross-office collaboration can be an important tool to triangulate data and proactively support identified students. Given advisors' central networks across the institution, they are well-positioned to lead many of these collaborative efforts (Karp & Lyons, 2025; McCutchen, 2023). Interrelated networks are particularly important to best serve SEFC who may be enrolled in other support programs but have not shared their lived experiences or unique needs within academic settings.

Perhaps most importantly, it offers SEFC the opportunity to self-disclose the identities they hold in a way that is most comfortable for them. Having autonomy over one's data and perceived identity can be particularly relevant to students who may have had their identity systematized or stigmatized in certain ways (Cheatham et al., 2021; Farnsworth et al., 2022). Questions addressing educational pathways and transitions, institution and community connections, and academic experiences or needs can be illuminating and offer SEFC an opportunity to provide insights and institutional feedback on the supports needed. Some SEFC may not be interested in disclosing their histories or may not have experienced a welcoming and supportive space to do so before arriving at the institution. For many, there is a negative stigma in having been in foster care, so sharing or self-identifying can be difficult to manage.

Stigma matters especially in academic spaces because college requires openness, help-seeking, and a sense of belonging—behaviors that stigma

directly undermines. When SEFC fear being judged, stereotyped, or perceived as less capable, they may avoid disclosing their background or asking for support, even when they need it (Johnson, 2024; Wagner & Heberle, 2024). Academic environments often assume stable families, financial resources, and traditional pathways, which can intensify feelings of “otherness” for SEFC and make vulnerability feel unsafe. One interviewee with lived experience shared, **“It’s hard because I didn’t want to be labeled as difficult or needing extra help, but the reality was that I did. I just learned to figure it out myself, but I wish I didn’t feel like I needed to.”** Because academic success depends on accessing advising, tutoring, financial aid navigation, and institutional resources, stigma becomes not just an emotional burden but also a structural barrier that can limit engagement, performance, and persistence.

SEFC-RELATED DATA RESOURCES

- National Youth in Transition Database
- 2025 Kids Count Data Book (Annie E. Casey Foundation)
- Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System

While data can be a powerful tool for advisors in better supporting SEFC, there are best practices to be mindful of. Inclusive and equity-centered data usage is paramount when working with special student populations such as SEFC. Disaggregating data, when possible, provides

valuable insights into the educational journeys of students with experience in foster care. This approach is especially beneficial for examining enrollment trends and educational outcomes. When institutions gain a clearer understanding of SEFC enrollment, academic progress, and the use of emergency aid, the findings should be viewed as descriptive—reflecting patterns at the group level—rather than as predictors of any particular student’s experiences, qualities, or likelihood of persisting. Additionally, practitioners should take care to maintain high data ethics when sharing, accessing, and leveraging student-level data.

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Adopting broad and inclusive data sets allows stakeholders to leverage both the power of students’ anecdotal perspectives with robust quantitative data to improve the responsiveness of support systems intended to encourage foster youth pursuing higher education. Data-driven decision making promotes equity, reveals systemic barriers, and helps identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, advisors are better equipped to support SEFC when they know which students are present and how many are attending the institution, enhancing the overall network of support for these students. Whenever possible, data transparency with students should be prioritized, and student perspectives should help drive any related decision making.

Recommendations for Advisors and Advising Departments

- ▶ Establish data-sharing protocols between financial aid, advising, and student support offices (within FERPA guidelines) or, at a minimum, build relationships that cultivate proactive, sustained, and ethical information sharing.
- ▶ Work with institutional research experts to add voluntary self-identification questions about foster care experience to advising intake protocols, advising practices, or other support programming documents.
- ▶ Use descriptive data to inform the development of professional practices and SEFC supports.

Engage in Holistic Professional Development

Current professional development for advisors can include participation in webinars and conferences, professional reading, e-learning opportunities, and engagement in structured training organized by professional networks such as [ASN](#), organizations like [NACADA](#), and system or institution-supported initiatives such as certificates or workshops offered by the [SUNY Center for Professional Development](#). These resources most often focus on core advising competencies, responding to student needs, emerging trends, self-care, and technology. Topics frequently address conceptual, informational, relational, technological, and personal knowledge and skills necessary to guide students through their academic and career journeys (Karp & Lyons, 2025). The field of advising continues to evolve to meet the needs of diverse student groups and advance institutions’ inclusive excellence strategies (McCutchen, 2023). Engaging in professional development is especially important for advisors supporting students who have experienced foster care, as this population faces unique challenges that often require a specialized, nuanced approach. Whenever possible, institution personnel with demonstrated experience supporting SEFC, as well as individuals with lived foster care experience, should be invited to inform efforts to scale and strengthen supports for this population. As one participant shared, “As a former foster youth who works on campus, I find tremendous pride in helping my peers understand how to better support these students.”

Through no fault of their own, many foster youth may have experienced trauma due to abuse, neglect, and multiple placement changes. Between 50% and 80% of children in foster care meet criteria for a mental health disorder that can manifest as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Leslie et al., 2005). These lived histories can result in SEFC needing additional encouragement to seek support from helping practitioners or, at a minimum, trauma-informed practitioners who understand the intersections between mental health and academic persistence. While many students experience personal challenges that can negatively affect academic performance and social–emotional well-being, SEFC may encounter these challenges at higher rates or lack adequate support from external communities (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Sarubbi, 2019).

Given their time in care, SEFC may not have been afforded the same family privilege or social capital that can help navigate the stressors of collegiate life. While advisors should not be expected to act as caseworkers, having some training on person-centered and culturally responsive advising can be particularly beneficial for supporting SEFC. Campus personnel with specialized professional development can be especially important as SEFC are navigating intersectional identities and perhaps incongruent lived experiences between home and campus life. Advisors with appropriate training can offer emotional support, connection to resources, and guidance in building positive relationships across the institution.

Additionally, understanding the context that can impact SEFC academic preparedness can also be useful for advisors to respond in nuanced ways, when appropriate. For example, SEFC may have experienced high academic instability stemming from frequent school changes and placement disruptions. Increased academic mobility can lead to gaps in learning and an inconsistent educational foundation (Hanson, 2024). Advisors need to understand these challenges and be prepared to assist students in understanding or navigating new academic requirements, rigor, and educational pathways. Ongoing professional development helps advisors understand and advocate for policies and practices that promote inclusivity and break down these barriers (Singletary, 2023). For example, perhaps advisors could work alongside admissions staff to inform how students with nontraditional high school academic progress should be considered for entry and how academic programs can help offer developmental education to meet gaps in preparation.

Furthermore, advisors can serve as vital bridges across institutional departments such as student affairs, multicultural departments, and career counseling, by modeling inclusive student support practices and connecting students to other well-informed practitioners. One academic advisor interviewed shared, **“I am lucky to be connected with a local chapter of a foster youth support organization. That liaison has been a great partner in not only helping me understand what SEFC resources there are but also serving as another member of the student’s academic network.”** Advisors who can identify and understand the specific needs of foster youth can not only provide appropriate and tailored academic and personal support to SEFC but can also advocate for institutional change (Watt et al., 2023). This deepened knowledge and sharing can work to create a more supportive and inclusive

institutional environment by addressing systemic barriers and advocating for specific resources for SEFC within and across departments while also promoting self-determination and empowerment through inclusive environments.

One interviewee shared an example of how an advisor with SEFC context knowledge positively impacted their educational journey: “As an SEFC, I had an academic advisor who knew all about my tuition waiver, how many hours I needed to maintain eligibility, and what other things I needed to help me keep going, like housing and book money.” This advocacy may include informing adjustments to admissions criteria, revising overly punitive academic probation policies, or collaborating to develop more person-centered crisis response protocols. Professional development enables advisors to move beyond a generalized understanding of student needs and develop the specialized knowledge, skills, and networks required to effectively support SEFC in overcoming barriers and achieving success in higher education. While these practices address SEFC needs specifically, they also strengthen advising quality and student outcomes across the institution.

Institutions should be sure to allocate funding and provide adequate faculty and staff capacity, when possible, to support these efforts while also taking advantage of a growing field of SEFC experts across multiple disciplines. Institutions

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can enhance their ability to support students by engaging external practitioners, consultancies, organizations, and community partners who bring specialized expertise in areas such as coaching, policy, communication, writing, and community-based practice. These collaborations strengthen staff and faculty capacity while creating a well-rounded, professionally trained network of support for SEFC. By scaffolding partners across multiple disciplines, institutions can provide sustained, reliable assistance that meets the complex needs of fast-moving youth populations and promotes both student success and institutional growth. Additionally, many philanthropic partners have

demonstrated a commitment to investing in campus-based programming and research that improves postsecondary outcomes for SEFC. Institutions committed to advancing equity should intentionally weave together these internal and external resources to design sustained, high-quality professional development curricula for advisors. Integrating these practices benefits not only students with foster care experience but also students from other marginalized or under-resourced communities, helping institutions become more responsive, inclusive, and more empowering environments for all learners.

Recommendations for Advisors and Advising Departments

- Offer ongoing professional development training for advisors centered on topics such as trauma-informed care or HOPE training, cultural competence (including issues of race, gender, and socioeconomic status), background on the foster care system, and its impact on college-going and success.
- Review strategic planning to support SEFC across the institution.
- Lead coalitions with other practitioners and departments to establish a culturally competent and inclusive institutional environment that supports SEFC and all students.

Develop and Share Resource and Networking Maps



Essential to creating an inclusive institutional environment for SEFC is having well-informed practitioners who are ready and willing to share broad resources and connect students to supportive networks. Students who have experienced foster care often cite financial difficulty and the cost of enrollment as the most significant barrier to their academic persistence (Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Okpych et al., 2025). Many students may not be aware of the resources available to them or may have limited knowledge about educational funding and difficulty managing finances. One interviewee shared, **“I honestly had no idea what resources were available to me as an SEFC specifically so having an advisor that could point me in the right direction would have made a huge difference.”**

Advisors equipped with professional development can provide guidance on scholarships, grants, and other financial aid options. Because of their proximity (1:1) to SEFC, advisors can advocate for them across the institution. Specifically, they can collaborate with financial aid and enrollment offices to build a network of informed practitioners and proactive counselors. There are existing federal and state initiatives SEFC can leverage, many of which offer funding support or other assistance such as housing, education stipends, and access to community-based programs. These resources can be vital in encouraging academic persistence (J. P. Gross et al., 2023; Parker & Sarubbi, 2017) but may not cover all the financial needs of SEFC. Advisors should be familiar with the following programs and, at a minimum, be prepared to offer a warm hand-off for students to connect with the program leaders.

John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood

In addition to traditional federal aid programs such as student loans and Pell grants, which are allocated through submitting the FAFSA, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood provides federal funding for youth ages 14–23 who are in foster care or have aged out. When a young person “ages out” of foster care, typically at 18, they leave the system without being adopted, obtaining guardianship, or reuniting with family (Pergamit et al., 2012). Programs like Chafee are designed to support these youth during transition, aiming to improve their stability and educational outcomes. Funding from Chafee varies by state and by program, and it changes over time depending on need and availability. This support can include direct cash assistance, educational vouchers, and housing help, but eligibility and award amounts depend on state rules and available funding. Some states offer direct payments to eligible youth to help cover living expenses. Education and training vouchers are also an integral component of the Chafee program that specifically provides financial support for postsecondary education and training to eligible SEFC, though they may not cover all associated costs.

Education and Training Vouchers

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program is another federal resource that supports vocational training and higher education expenses, including tuition, books, rent, and personal costs. ETVs are distributed on a first-come, first-served basis and are not guaranteed to every applicant. They help with tuition and fees at

postsecondary schools, as well as required books, supplies, computers, room and board, housing, transportation, childcare, special projects, and allowances for dependent care, disability-related expenses, and cooperative education. Eligibility for ETVs generally includes young adults who are currently or were previously in foster care, though exact criteria differ by state. The program typically offers up to \$5,000 per academic year, but this can change. Funds are usually provided after other financial aid options are used up and are only available until a state's allocation runs out (Pergamit et al., 2012).

While these are federal and state-led programs, advisors can play an important role in assisting students to take advantage of these resources (Karp & Lyons, 2025). Students must meet academic performance and enrollment requirements to remain eligible, so advisors should be familiar with these when helping plan courses. Advisors often counsel students on credit loads and may recommend reducing them if students are struggling, though this approach can risk their funding. Additionally, students must reapply annually for both programs, so advisors should collaborate with the financial aid office to encourage students to fill out the FAFSA and contact their state ETV liaisons (Cheatham et al., 2021; Toms et al., 2023; Watt et al., 2023).

The Foster Youth to Independence Initiative

The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative, launched by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2019, aims to prevent homelessness among young people transitioning out of foster care. It provides Housing Choice Vouchers for up to 36 months, offering rental assistance and connecting youth with essential support services in housing, education, and employment to promote stability and self-sufficiency. Public housing agencies and local child welfare agencies collaborate to identify and provide assistance to eligible youth, typically ages 18 to 24 who are leaving foster care. These individuals receive tenant-based vouchers to help with housing expenses (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). The program also offers resources such as financial literacy counseling, guidance on housekeeping and nutrition, help with education continuation, career advancement and job preparation, and support to maintain housing stability and find willing landlords.

FYI's goals are to prevent homelessness, encourage self-sufficiency, and provide a stable foundation for young adults as they pursue educational and employment opportunities. This initiative is crucial because youth leaving foster care

often face sudden loss of housing, limited financial resources, and often, a lack of family support. By offering comprehensive housing and support, FYI helps these individuals achieve a smooth transition to adulthood (Pergamit et al., 2012). While this initiative does not specifically address academic persistence, it provides vital wraparound services and resources that can help SEFC success. Again, advisors who are aware of this program can be champions for SEFC and offer encouragement to them to seek out the local public child welfare agency to access these resources.

State Tuition Waivers

Foster youth tuition waivers are state-funded programs in the United States designed to help students with foster care experience pay for college. These programs are primarily state-funded and are part of broader efforts to increase postsecondary attainment for SEFC. These waivers typically cover “last dollar” tuition and certain fees at public institutions, and in some states, may also include room, board, and additional costs. Funding derives from institutions, state sources, or federal programs like the ETV program (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2022; Parker & Sarubbi, 2017). Eligibility usually requires current or former foster care status, with additional state-specific criteria such as a minimum period in foster care or age restrictions. Some states require students to apply within a set timeframe after high school graduation or to fulfill extra requirements like community service. Waivers often have time limits, such as completing a degree within 6 years or a designated number of semesters. As of mid-2023, an estimated 37 states have some form of tuition waiver or scholarship program for SEFC, though the exact number may have increased since then, as state initiatives evolve (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2022; Okpych et al., 2025). These programs are crucial for SEFC persistence. By eliminating some of the financial burdens from tuition costs, students can concentrate on scaffolding wraparound supports and their academic pursuits. Similar to other support programs, tuition waiver eligibility may be dependent on particular academic and enrollment criteria, so advisors should be mindful when academic planning with students. One SEFC practitioner with their own history of time in foster care shared, **“I had a tuition waiver but still needed help to cover some miscellaneous costs that jeopardized my academic progress.”** While an advisor's primary role is to help with academic planning, understanding the potential roadblocks to success, such as financial and other wraparound needs, could prove very beneficial to the guidance process.

Higher education professionals can connect with their state's ETV or tuition waiver representatives by locating the agency or partner that administers these programs, which varies by state but typically includes the state child welfare department, a contracted nonprofit or youth-serving organization, or the state higher education/financial aid agency. Most states publish the direct contact information for their ETV coordinator or tuition waiver administrator online, and the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) provides a reliable national directory of independent living and ETV contacts. In states with coordinated SEFC college-support networks, institutional staff can also reach out to statewide liaisons who help connect institutions with the appropriate representatives.

In addition to these federal and state programs, there are many national or regional support programs to support SEFC, as well as numerous postsecondary education systems and institutions with [SEFC-specific initiatives](#). Resources dedicated specifically for SEFC can vary widely depending on institutional capacity. Mapping resources and networks is beneficial for higher education professionals to understand the local tools available

they need to not only enroll in college but also to thrive academically and personally, and ultimately, to succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

Recommendations for Advisors and Advising Departments

- Understand broadly the federal, state, and local support programs available for students who have experienced foster care.
- Engage in collaboration with campus professionals—including financial aid offices and student basic needs centers—to develop a comprehensive understanding of each student's academic and personal circumstances, and to promote the strategic sharing of resources.
- Map state resources, specialized contacts, and programs to share with students as an ongoing part of advising engagements.

When advisors develop a deeper awareness of the resources available to support SEFC and understand how these tools promote student persistence, they become even more powerful advocates for change within the institution. By applying this knowledge, advisors not only connect students to specialized SEFC professionals when needed but also help advance more holistic, equitable, and proactive practices within their institutions.

OTHER NATIONAL SEFC SUPPORT PROGRAMS

- Casey Family Programs
- Cetera
- Educate Tomorrow
- FAAN Network
- FosterClub
- Foster Care Alumni of America
- Foster Care to Success
- John Burton Advocates for Youth

(Hanson, 2024). There are a few key federal and state initiatives that provide direct postsecondary assistance to SEFC. While it is not expected that all advisors understand the nuance of these programs, having a general idea of the broader supports available and how best to refer a student for assistance can make a significant impact for SEFC navigating multiple pathways.

The number and type of external stakeholders and community partners advisors can collaborate with may differ significantly by location, but these partners are often valuable resources for providing comprehensive wraparound support. Mapping resources and networks is an essential strategy for ensuring SEFC receive the comprehensive support

Refine Student Outreach and Communications

Institutions use a range of communication methods, such as text messages, in-app notifications, emails, and push notifications, to share timely and relevant information with students. Institutions also apply artificial intelligence to monitor engagement, support two-way feedback, and centralize resources through integrated platforms. By using various platforms, including campus apps, institutions reach students on their preferred channels, thus improving the efficiency and effectiveness of important communications like enrollment alerts (McNair et al., 2022). Advising can use these tools for tailored outreach to specific student groups. Student support professionals continually seek effective ways to connect with students, though multiple messages from different platforms can overwhelm recipients. Factors like methodology, scheduling, language, and role clarification are critical considerations. Inclusive options should be available, such as first-generation explanations and opt-in choices for students (McCutchen, 2023; Museus, 2021).

SEFC may feel excluded or not identify with traditional labels. They often face unique



challenges, such as being first-generation college students or from lower-income backgrounds. Inclusive communication affirms their identity, provides access to resources, and builds trust without pressuring disclosure (Sarubbi, 2019; Tom et al., 2023). There are numerous ways to improve communication and outreach to all students, particularly for SEFC. Use multiple outreach methods to share information via texts, flyers in common areas, open houses themed around diverse experiences, and accessible social media content. Information and outreach should avoid jargon and be clear about the services offered, expectations, and the process for seeking assistance. Additionally, communicating that SEFC are welcome and there is expertise in the office is highly beneficial and increases the likelihood that students will seek out the office. Advising offices should proactively share clear details about services available, ensuring students, especially those with foster care backgrounds, know how to access support.

As previously noted, allowing individuals to self-identify by using voluntary checkboxes, optional interest forms, and anonymous surveys can support effective data collection for SEFC. Additionally, using culturally competent and inclusive language is paramount to successful outreach and support. Culturally inclusive terminology for current foster youth or SEFC emphasizes person-first language, strengths-based framing, and trauma-informed sensitivity (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). The goal is to avoid stigmatizing labels and respect the individual's identity and life experiences, which may involve

grief, loss, and systemic challenges (Sarubbi, 2019). The most inclusive language is always what the student and their support persons prefer, so asking directly is best. Outdated terminology or phrases such as “at-risk,” “ward of the state,” and “orphan” should never be used. All institution personnel should also be mindful to avoid blaming language or voyeuristic questions about a student's lived experience or time in care, and center “support persons” language over “family or parent” whenever possible (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). Language should build rapport, validate their experience, and promote agency in asking for support. Lastly, for youth in foster care, preserving cultural identity is crucial for a strong sense of self, so all methods of communication should also follow best practices in reference to race, gender, and other lived experiences while prioritizing confidentiality.

Recommendations for Advisors and Advising Departments

- Institute multiple communication methods that are most accessible to students.
- Promote the clear role and services of the advising department and distribute the information via multiple communications channels.
- Audit and revise any communications that do not include affirming language.



Articulate a Proactive Strategy for Direct Support

Institutions continuously update their practices to meet evolving student needs and strategic goals. Beneficial reforms often include building coalitions both within and among offices and departments, establishing consistent procedures, promoting an inclusive culture, and addressing knowledge gaps caused by staff turnover or shifting institutional priorities. Advising and student affairs departments benefit from having documented strategies to support specific student groups, such as those with foster care experience. These strategies help ensure consistency and sustainability when changes in staffing and

“I think our [advising] department would really benefit from a clearer strategy on how to support SEFC, or at least in having some resources on hand to increase our capacity to provide guidance.”

strategic direction might otherwise disrupt support services, or when advisors are managing high caseloads. Without clear strategies, efforts can become inconsistent and overly dependent on individual staff members, which can negatively impact practitioners and students alike. Explicit commitments help elevate student support as a clear institutional priority.

A strategic approach should involve formalizing SEFC supports within departmental plans, equity frameworks, and advising protocols, signaling it as a core commitment. Role clarity is also important, including identifying responsible staff and integrating supportive practices across various positions rather than limiting them to specialized programs. One advisor interviewed said, “I think our [advising] department would really benefit from a clearer strategy on how to support SEFC, or at least in having some resources on hand to increase our capacity to provide guidance.”

ASN advocates for a holistic advising approach that is equitable, student-centered, and proactive. Key practices include building intentional, ongoing relationships; leveraging technology for data-driven, personalized support; fostering cross-functional collaboration; and implementing specialized training to eliminate equity gaps in

student outcomes. Building on this suggestion, implementation plans may include actions like providing trauma-informed training, using intake forms to identify SEFC, and offering focused advising and resource navigation. Resources, practices, and policies should be informed by SEFC themselves or by those with foster care expertise and be implemented in ways that also advance equity for students holding other marginalized identities. Ongoing monitoring of engagement and outcomes for SEFC, coupled with disaggregated data analysis, allows departments to assess effectiveness and report successes and areas needing improvement in annual reviews. To maintain continuity, developing internal documentation, tool kits, and onboarding resources ensures new staff can uphold these practices. With a clearly outlined approach, supporting students with foster care experience becomes embedded in institutional operations and culture, reducing reliance on individuals or isolated initiatives. **Advisors are powerful agents for advancing positive institutional priorities and practices, but this work is not theirs alone. Institutions committed to advancing equitable student outcomes should consider expanding support practices for SEFC, and by extension, for all student populations.** Local, state, and national experts and organizations represent valuable partners for institutions seeking to strengthen SEFC support. Strategic investment in external partnerships can help institutions identify opportunities to refine and sustain student support systems.

Recommendations for Advisors and Advising Departments

- ▶ Lead a task force or committee that focuses on the formalization of strategies to support SEFC. Goals should include identification of SEFC champions, pathways to gather student voice, assessment of ways to leverage data and communications for SEFC support, and the development of cross-departmental collaborations.
- ▶ Engage outside experts in the refinement of internal policies and practices that directly improve support systems for SEFC.





Looking Ahead

Institutions must continue deepening their understanding of diverse student needs while supporting multiple academic pathways, including transfer agreements, workforce development, and micro-credentialing. This work is essential because, despite significant barriers, SEFC persist in enrolling at postsecondary institutions.

Colleges and universities should receive them with intentionality, inclusivity, and care. Advisors already play a critical role in supporting all students, and their impact can be especially meaningful for SEFC. Advisors are often the first, and sometimes the only, professionals assigned to work directly with students, placing them in a uniquely influential position. By refining advising practices to more intentionally leverage data, communication strategies, ongoing professional development, and external resources, advisors can serve as powerful change agents for SEFC.

It is equally important to recognize and honor the remarkable resilience SEFC demonstrate in persisting through adversity to reach higher education. Their presence is not only a testament to perseverance, but also a call to action for institutions to respond with dignity, inclusion, and sustained support. **Supporting SEFC is not the responsibility of a single office or role. It requires a collective commitment**

across departments and strong partnerships with local, state, and national organizations.

Through collaboration, ethical data use, and sustained investment, institutions can create environments in which SEFC—and all students—are empowered to thrive, achieve their academic goals, and build brighter futures.

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Description
Academic Mobility	A student's ability to move through educational pathways—such as transferring institutions, changing majors, or progressing toward a degree—without unnecessary barriers or loss of credits or support.
Aging Out	The process in which a youth exits foster care because they reach the state's age limit (typically 18, 21, or 23), often without permanent family connections or long-term support.
Banner System	A higher education administrative software (Ellucian Banner) used to manage student information, enrollment, financial aid, and other institutional processes.
Chafee (John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood)	A federal program that provides funds to states to support youth transitioning out of foster care with education, employment, housing, and independent living resources.
ETV (Education and Training Voucher)	A federal financial aid program offering eligible youth with foster care experience up to \$5,000 annually for postsecondary education or training expenses.
Family Privilege	The unrecognized advantages gained from stable family networks offering emotional, financial, and guidance-based support—resources many SEFC may not have.
Foster Care	A temporary, state-supervised living arrangement for children and youth unable to remain safely with their biological families due to abuse, neglect, or other safety concerns.
Foster Youth	Individuals who are placed in temporary out-of-home care through the child welfare system due to concerns about safety, stability, or well-being in their home.
Guardian Scholars	A campus-based support model/program designed for students with foster care experience, providing academic advising, financial support, mentoring, and community-building resources.
HOPE Training	Training grounded in the Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) framework, emphasizing positive childhood experiences as protective factors that build resilience.
Interoperability	The ability of different campus systems, departments, or technologies to exchange data and work together seamlessly to support students.
SEFC	Students who have experienced foster care are individuals who are currently placed, or have been, in the foster care system at any point in their lives and are now pursuing or enrolled in postsecondary education.
Social Capital	The networks, relationships, and informal knowledge that help individuals navigate institutions, access resources, and gain opportunities.
TRIO	Federally funded programs supporting first-generation, low-income students and students with disabilities through academic, financial, and personal support services.

Acknowledgments

The information and recommendations shared in this resource were informed by conversations with academic advisors, SEFC support practitioners, some of whom also have lived experience in foster care. I thank them for their expertise and continued commitment to supporting students.

Colleen Montoya Barbano

Jamie Bennett

Dani Carillo

Maddy Day

Cierra Draper-West

Sam Garman

Angela Hoffman-Cooper

Simone Hidds-Monroe

Sebrena Jackson

Kizzy Jones-Lopez

Danisha Keating

Felipe Longoria-Shin

Monika Mala

Lauren Padget

Alissa Pritchett

Tanya Smith

Lori Tiller

Jarod Wilson

Karie Rozen and members of the Foster Success Michigan Higher Education Consortium

Recommended Citation

Sarubbi, M. (2026). *Advancing advising practices to support students who have experienced foster care*. Advising Success Network.



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About the Advising Success Network

The Advising Success Network (ASN) is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to engage institutions in holistic advising redesign to advance success for all students, including Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander students and poverty-affected students. The network develops services and resources to guide institutions in implementing evidence-based advising practices. Since its formation in 2018, ASN has supported over 250 institutions in 30 states and created more than 50 open-source resources for practitioners and students. ASN is coordinated by NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and includes partners Achieving the Dream, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education, EDUCAUSE, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and Young Invincibles.



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