



Campus liaisons for students who have experienced foster care: Lessons learned from Texas legislation

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ABSTRACT

Texas has been a leader in creating policies and programs to support students in higher education who have experienced foster care (SEFC). The state has a tuition and fee waiver, extended foster care, and a state-wide collaborative devoted to improving higher education outcomes of SEFC. In 2015 the state passed innovative legislation requiring every college and university to identify a campus liaison for SEFC. The present study is a process evaluation to assess the implementation of the liaison legislation. We conducted in-depth interviews with SEFC, a content analysis of campus websites, and a survey of campus liaisons. Results reveal that students do want a single point of contact and when connected with a liaison, see that relationship as essential to their success. However, half of all campuses (49%) have not complied with the legislative requirement to identify the liaison on their websites, making it difficult for SEFC to know who to contact at these institutions. In addition, liaisons that responded to our survey report that they want to serve SEFC, but lack the training, time, and resources to fulfill their designated role. Conclusions are that legislated policies for SEFC can affect change, but require sufficient investment in order to adequately support the students they are designed to serve.

1. Introduction

The majority of youth who experience foster care report that they want to go to college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016; McMillen et al., 2003). However, less than a third attend and of those who do, graduation rates are low (Courtney et al., 2010; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Watt, Faulkner, Bustillos, & Madden, 2019). Consequently, research estimates that only about 1–11% of former foster youth achieve a college degree by age 24 compared to 32.5% of the US population (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; White et al., 2015; Wolanin, 2005). Poor educational outcomes undermine foster youths' ability to create a more stable, prosperous, and healthy life than they experienced as children. Fortunately, there is a national movement to improve higher education outcomes for youth who have experienced foster care. There

is an array of diverse strategies for accomplishing this goal, however, extended foster care, tuition and fee waivers, and efforts to develop campus support programs are perhaps the most noteworthy efforts. Currently, 26 states offer extended care and 38 states have tuition and fee waivers for students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) (Bustillos et al., 2022; Courtney, Okpych, & Park, 2018; Gross, 2019). In addition, several states such as California, Florida, Michigan, Georgia, and Texas, have created collaborative networks to increase the level of campus support available to SEFC attending the colleges and universities in that state. However, these initiatives vary from state to state and assessments of state strategies are needed (Hernandez, Day, & Henson, 2017; Watt & Kim 2019).

Texas was one of the first states to legislate a tuition and fee waiver for SEFC. This legislation, adopted in 1993, is one of the largest and most comprehensive tuition waiver programs in the country. In the last ten

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years, Texas has amped up its effort to support SEFC's higher education goals. Extended foster care has been available for many years but was expanded by state legislation in 2009. Extended Foster Care is a voluntary program that offers young adults turning 18 in Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) care opportunities to transition to independence with DFPS supervision, if there is an available placement until age 21. In addition, the 501c3 nonprofit Education Reach for Texans (Reach) emerged in 2009 to promote higher education for SEFC. Reach is a collaborative network of individuals working to help colleges and universities develop campus supports and other services to champion postsecondary education success for SEFC. The Texas legislature contributed to the campus support movement in 2015 with HB 3748, a bill mandating (unfunded) that every college and university in Texas have a designated liaison on campus to provide information and support to SEFC. In 2019, the legislature passed an additional bill (HB 1702) providing specific directives regarding how campuses (and liaisons) should be assisting students. Specifically, campuses are required to provide liaisons with a list of SEFC on their campuses so they can reach out to them to provide support. Campuses are also required to publicize the name and contact information for the liaison on their website. Finally, in a less constructive statement, the bill states that liaisons "may participate in any training" that is available. Collaboration between institutions of higher education and child welfare professionals is not expected nor written in any of the state legislation. However, Education Reach for Texans hosts an annual conference that brings these and many other experts together to discuss opportunities for coordination and collaboration across systems, and to provide training to campus liaisons.

In addition to the tuition and fee waiver and Extended Foster Care, students can also apply for the Educational Training Voucher, commonly known as ETV funds. The ETV program is a federal program that serves students ages 16 to 23 by providing up to \$5,000 a year to attend college or vocational programs. Overall university or college cost of attendance determines the amount of ETV students receive. Students may not receive ETV funds for more than 5 years. These funds are made possible by the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood (the Chafee Program) funds. State mandated foster care liaisons are supposed to inform students about these benefits.

Despite all of these efforts, recent research reveals that higher education outcomes for SEFC in Texas are poor. Only 2–3% of SEFC in Texas receive a higher education credential by age 24 (Watt, Faulkner, Bustillos, & Madden, 2019). Additional research on the state tuition waiver revealed that students who use the waiver have significantly higher graduation rates, but that 40% of the students enrolled and eligible for the waiver do not use it (Watt & Faulkner, 2020). The liaison legislation was designed, in part, to help SEFC understand and access the resources available to them, and to provide additional instrumental and emotional support. However, with no formal evaluation efforts, it is difficult to tell if this policy has not been successfully implemented or whether it has been well executed, but ineffective. Our research team set out to examine these issues. Our research is a two-phase investigation which seeks to a) describe the level of campus support provided to SEFC across the state, looking specifically at liaison accessibility, knowledge, and services provided, and b) determine whether the identified supports improve academic outcomes for these students. This paper provides the results of the first, process-oriented phase of our investigation. We conducted a mixed-method study which included in-depth interviews with SEFC currently enrolled in a college/university in Texas, a content analysis of campus websites, and an online survey of campus liaisons. Our research was also participatory, as our research team included foster scholar consultants and a graduate research assistant with lived experience in the foster care system.

2. Literature on campus support

The Guardian Scholars program at California State, established in 1998, is the first documented campus support program for SEFC (CSU-

Fullerton, 2019). It was a pioneering program that provided comprehensive support in the areas of housing, finances, academics, and emotional/social support. Since then, several notable programs have emerged including but not limited to The Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan (Seita Scholars Program, 2017), Arizona State University's Bridging Success Program (ASU Bridging Success, 2017; Geiger et al., 2016), and Foster Alumni Creating Educational Success (FACES) at Texas State University (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). In recent years the campus support movement has continued to expand as have the number of empirical investigations designed to describe these programs. Research reveals that most programs either offer financial support or help students access available monetary resources (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger, Piel, Day, & Schelbe, 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). In addition, some programs offer additional support services such as academic coaching/tutoring, mentoring, career programs, and social activities (Geiger, et al., 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Casey Family Programs created the "It's My Life Framework", as a model for constructing campus support programming for SEFC (Casey Family Programs, 2006). The model identifies seven domains of support that SEFC need to help them succeed in a college environment which include; education and academics, finances, housing, physical and mental health, life skills, social relationships and community connections, and personal and cultural identity. However, research on campus support programs (CSPs) note that existing programs vary considerably in terms of where they are housed, staffing, types of services offered, and whether the programs are guided by any underlying theoretical model (Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Lietz, 2016; Geiger, et al., 2018; Piel, Geiger, Schelbe, Day, & Kearney, 2020; Randolph & Thompson, 2017).

Descriptive research on campus support initiatives has also examined the programs from the students' perspective. Findings consistently reveal that students welcome these support services and see them as critical to their success. More specifically, students report that they value services that assist them in the areas of financial aid, housing, academics, and developing social and emotional supports, particularly those that help them create a community of their peers who have also experienced foster care (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Huang, Fernandez, Rhoden, & Joseph, 2019; Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). Students also report that the provision of support services helps them to feel connected to the larger university community (Randolph & Thompson, 2017). However, Dworsky and Pérez (2010) note considerable variation in how students learn about available support services. This indicates a need for assessments which specifically examine student outreach efforts.

A much smaller, but important body of research has explored the impact of campus support initiatives on academic outcomes. A few studies have found graduation rates for SEFC who participate in a campus support program to be higher than other estimates for SEFC (Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017). In addition, Huang, Fernandez., Rhoden, and Joseph (2019) found that SEFC who enrolled in a CSP saw improvements in their GPAs. While these studies only examined students who participated in CSPs, Watt, Norton, and Jones (2013) used an "intent to treat" model, finding that graduation rates for SEFC at a university that provides a CSP were on par with the general student population. Findings from these studies indicate that campus support programs may improve outcomes for SEFC and that with this assistance, students can exhibit high levels of achievement in a post-secondary environment. These studies contributed to the literature by using valid outcome measures and comparison groups. However, these initial investigations were limited methodologically by small samples and/or a lack of control variables. Fortunately, a recent study conducted by Okpych, Park, Sayed, and Courtney (2020), provides a more rigorous empirical assessment of the impact of CSPs on academic outcomes. The researchers used data from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CaYOUTH) and the National Student Clearinghouse, to examine CSP participation in California and its impact on persistence. They found that approximately half of SEFC participated in

CSPs and that CSP participation doubled the odds of persistence. Persistence was measured as whether the student remained enrolled through their first two consecutive non-summer semesters (either part-time or full-time). The researchers were able to establish the positive association between CSP participation and persistence while controlling for a large number of covariates including demographics, educational background, foster care and maltreatment history, extended care, and independent living plans. Thus, while research on CSPs is far from conclusive, campus support programs appear to be a promising practice for increasing the odds that SEFC will succeed in higher education.

The CSP literature provides a theoretical model for creating programs, documents students' interest in receiving these services, and indicates the potential for a positive impact. Thus, it is no surprise that there is a nationwide movement to create CSPs. What is less clear, is how CSPs should be structured in order to be scalable, sustainable, and effective. While Okpkch and colleagues (2020) reveal that most colleges and universities in California have CSPs, not every campus across the country can afford (or will fund) a fully staffed, comprehensive CSP and many states will not step in to fill this void. As a case in point, Texas does not require or fund CSPs. Instead, the state adopted the liaison legislation as a means of supporting SEFC. This was an innovative and promising strategy because it applied broadly to all colleges and universities in the state. However, it represents a narrowly defined service model and an unfunded approach. In 2014 Florida passed similar legislation that broadly mandates but doesn't fund campus liaisons/coaches (Statute 409.1452). Both Florida and Texas legislatures also mandated that higher education outcomes for SEFC be tracked. However, neither of these states have formally evaluated the implementation and/or impact of their liaison programs. This information is critical for understanding the potential value of these kinds of state-led initiatives and how they should be structured and executed. The present study aims to describe the implementation of the liaison legislation in Texas, and initiate dialogue surrounding these macro-level issues.

3. Methods

This research is a mixed-method study utilizing quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources in Texas. We conducted in-depth interviews with a small sample of college students who had experienced foster care, conducted a content analysis of the websites of every college and university in the state, and administered surveys to all of the designated campus liaisons. The broad goal of this investigation is to provide a detailed description of campus support in Texas for SEFC. The purpose of choosing a mixed-method design was to a) ensure that the voices of the subjects of study were represented, b) to use the qualitative methodology to inform the design of the quantitative methods, and c) for complementarity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Our study also constitutes participatory action research where the subjects of study become partners in the research process (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2016). To achieve this goal, we hired three foster scholars from outside the university. One foster scholar is a co-author on the present study. Other foster scholars provided input into the study design. Foster scholars are those who have training in research (Master's or Doctoral level) and lived experience in the foster care system (<https://www.thefosterscholars.org/>). Our foster scholars reviewed and provided feedback on our interview guide, coding scheme, and survey design. We also hired a Texas State graduate student with lived experience in the foster care system to be the research assistant on the project. This student was involved in all phases of the research and is also a co-author on the study. The following provides additional detail about the study methodology. This study was approved by the Texas State University Institutional Review Board (#7408).

3.1. In-depth interviews

We conducted the in-depth interviews with SEFC to get a deeper understanding of their post-secondary experiences. We wanted to hear about their collegiate experiences, their available supports, interactions with their liaisons, and what services they value the most and least. These qualitative findings allow the student's voice to be represented in our findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We wanted to make sure we heard what was important to the students, in their own words. We used the information provided by the SEFC to help us to identify which resources we should document in the website content analysis and liaison survey. We also used this method to test the validity of our assumptions that liaisons and campus support programs were even valued by SEFC, before we devoted our study to investigating the quantity and quality of this support.

Our initial sampling strategy for the in-depth interviews was to sample cases from two ends of a continuum of support. We hoped to get four participants from schools with a comprehensive support program for SEFC and four participants who were attending schools with a lower level of support. We partnered with Education Reach for Texans (Reach) to define these two strata and to obtain contact information for the liaison at each school. Reach maintains a list of all liaisons (obtained from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board) and volunteers call liaisons yearly to update the list and discuss training options. From the information Reach compiled, we defined high support schools as institutions that had an acting liaison, a campus support program, a student organization, trained liaison in trauma-informed care and benefits available to students, and/or a group of caring individuals who had identified SEFC on their campus. Low support schools were those where liaisons had not responded to Reach volunteers and had never been to a Reach conference.

We conducted eight in-depth interviews with SEFC attending colleges and universities in Texas. We used the stratified list created by Education Reach for Texans and selected from the two strata randomly. We asked the selected liaisons to distribute information about our study to the SEFC on their campuses. Students were offered a \$50 gift card for participating in the study. A large number of students from high support schools volunteered (more than we could interview), but very few students from lower support schools volunteered. Thus, our final sample was of six participants from high support schools and two participants from lower support schools. While this was not our goal, it confirmed our hypothesis that liaisons in lower support schools may not have contact information or have forged a relationship with SEFC on their campuses. Because of our small sample of SEFC on low support campuses, we did not meet saturation with these informants in terms of obtaining a detailed understanding of the needs and experiences of students at low support schools. Yet, we quickly met saturation (Patton, 2015) with high support campuses while hearing consistent and redundant feedback during the interview process. All participants were provided with information on mental health resources and how to connect with Education Reach in order to have a state-wide community of support. All student interviews were deidentified to respect participant anonymity. The interview questions are as follows:

Could you tell me about what types of supports are available on your campus that are designed specifically for students who have experienced foster care?

- a) Who/what entity offers these services?
- b) Do you have a campus liaison? What services do they offer?
- c) Are there other programs available that provide support to students who have experienced foster care? If so, what programs are these? What services do they offer?
- d) If there is a liaison and a separate campus support program, do they work together? What are the similarities and differences between the services offered by the liaison and those offered by the campus support program?

e) What else is important for me to know about who provides support services for students who have experienced foster care or what these support services look like on your campus?

Could you tell me about the services you have used? Why did you use them? If you didn't use them, why not? I'm speaking about services that are designed specifically for (or tailored to) students who have experienced foster care.

Are there services specifically to assist you with finances and employment? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there services specifically to assist you with housing? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there services specifically to assist you with your education and academic performance? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there services specifically to assist you with your mental health needs and physical health? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there services specifically to assist you with accessing campus resources, financial literacy, resume building, job searching after graduation, services like these? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there services specifically to assist you with your personal and cultural identity? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there services specifically to support your social relationships and connections? If not, what would those services look like to you?

Are there any other services that you've used that are specific for people who have experience in foster care, and why did you use them? What additional strategies would you suggest for campuses to better meet the needs of students with foster care experiences?

What other information would you like to share about your experiences with campus services for students with experience in foster care?

The interviews were transcribed using [Rev.com](#) and then coded in the online qualitative software Dedoose. Dedoose is internet-based and allows multiple people to work on the same project without being influenced by previous coding. Interviews were initially coded line-by-line, a coding process adopted from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Four coders took each interview and coded the transcripts line-by-line. We then met to negotiate initial codes and then grouped them to create themes, which ultimately led to building consensus on the overarching issues and themes discussed in the findings. The interview guide and analysis was structured to focus on the Casey Seven Life Domains framework for campus support for SEFC (Casey Family Programs, 2006) to discover whether the following services were being offered and what the students' thoughts were about the services: financial aid, housing, mental health, physical health, academics, social support, personal and cultural identity, and life skills. Four researchers, including the graduate SEFC, participated in the coding process from start to finish. We conducted interviews not for generalizability, but ultimately as key informant interviews.

3.2. Content analysis of campus websites

The content analysis of campus websites allowed us to examine the accessibility of liaisons and describe the types of support they or the college/university reportedly provide to SEFC. We assessed all 2- and 4-year public universities' websites in Texas ($n = 113$). Website coding was conducted from June through July of 2021. Our foster scholar research assistant went to each campus homepage and entered the term "foster care" to initiate the search. If nothing relevant was produced, a new search was launched using just the term "foster". The researcher clicked on any link that emerged from these searches that appeared relevant for finding the liaison for SEFC or locating campus support services for SEFC. The researcher created a data file with the campus as the unit of analysis and the variables as the types of supports that were

found on any campus website that emerged from the search. We measured several variables to capture the type of support and how easy or difficult it was to find the information sought. The variables and their operationalization are as follows:

Liaison: We measured whether the foster care liaison was identified on any campus website (yes/no), how quickly the information could be located (<2 min, 2–5 min, more than 5 min, or could not find), and the type of contact information provided (email, phone, and/or photo).

Services: We examined whether the campus/liaison provided direct services specifically for SEFC or if the liaison helped SEFC access services for the general student population. We used the Casey Seven Domains (Casey Family Programs, 2006) to guide our coding and included the following types of support; financial aid (e.g. help with tuition, meals, bills), housing (e.g. provision or help finding housing), mental health (e.g. counseling), physical health (e.g. health care services), academics (e.g. tutoring), social support (e.g. student organization or social activities), personal and cultural identity (e.g. support surrounding issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and/or foster identity), and life skills (e.g. money management). We searched for whether the campus website said these services were provided specifically for SEFC (yes/no).

SEFC Empowering Content: Based on guidance provided by our foster scholar consultants, we also examined whether the content of the websites presented messages or images that demonstrate positive outcomes or experiences of SEFC. Deficit messages focus on the limitations and poor outcomes of SEFC. While the latter information may accurately reflect the need for services (and may be a necessary piece of information), we were looking to see if these deficit-based messages were balanced by content which uplifts and empowers SEFC. We examined three variables, photos of the students in the program (yes/no), student voice represented in any of the verbiage about the program (yes/no), and strengths-based content (yes/no). Examples of strengths-based messages include a success story of a SEFC on that campus, messages about resilience, or a newsletter showing photos of SEFC having meetings and social activities.

Our research team worked collaboratively to establish a coding system. Our foster scholar research assistant was primarily responsible for the website analysis. This researcher conducted initial coding of a sample of websites and then met with a supervising researcher to discuss the accuracy of the coding and identify any refinements needed in the coding instructions. After the graduate research assistant completed all of the coding, the senior researcher conducted a reliability check on a subset of the data (10%), and confirmed reliability for this subset. At the end of this structured top-down coding process, the research team agreed that the SEFC research assistant should also search the school websites subjectively, from her own perspective as a SEFC. For this part, she coded every campus with a composite score as to how interested she would be in attending that particular college or university (a five-point Likert scale from no interest in attending to a strong interest in attending). She based this score on her cumulative assessment of the quantity and quality of services and messaging aimed at SEFC. She also took detailed qualitative notes of her impressions of the services and messaging. We hoped this small portion of the study would provide us with an ethnographic research component that could simulate the experiences of potential students as they navigate websites searching for a campus where they would feel welcomed and supported.

In addition to coding the information on the websites for each campus, we merged these data with the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to capture the institutional characteristics of the campuses. IPEDS is a system of twelve interrelated survey components that are administered by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). IPEDS gathers information from every college, university, technical and vocational institution that participates in the federal student financial aid programs. Survey responses are retrieved over three collection periods throughout the year (Fall, Spring, and Winter). For the present study we used the following

IPEDS variables to capture the characteristics of the student body; institution size category (<1,000, 1,000–4,999, 5,000–9,999, 10,000–19,999, 20,000+), percent Hispanic/Latino for undergraduate enrollment, percent Black or African American for undergraduate enrollment, percent of undergraduate students awarded Pell grant aid, and average dollar amount of Pell grant aid awarded to undergraduate students. We measured variables to capture resources as funding in dollars per academic year (per full-time enrolled student) for remedial, academic, and student services. Finally, we measured full-time retention and graduation rates. Full-time retention is defined as the percentage of first-time degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall semester who re-enroll the next consecutive semester. Graduation rates are measured as six-year completion rates for four-year universities and three-year completion rates for two-year institutions. We conducted bivariate analyses of all IPEDS institutional variables with our measure of whether campuses posted contact information about the foster care liaison on their website (yes/no). We also ran logistic regression with liaison contact as the dependent variable and included all IPEDS variables as predictor variables. Our goal was to determine if certain types of institutions were more/less likely to post information about their liaisons. Analyses of our quantitative data were conducted using SPSS 27.0.

3.3. Survey of campus liaisons

In the Spring of 2021, our team distributed a survey to all foster care liaisons in the state of Texas. Our sampling frame (population) was identified using the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) list of foster care liaisons. This list is available on the College for All Texans website. It contains the names and contact information for liaisons for all colleges and universities in Texas.

We believe this is a fairly complete and accurate list from which to draw our sample of liaisons. However, in the research process we discovered inaccuracies in the list. Several liaisons let us know that they were no longer the liaison and directed us to the new liaison. A few liaisons completed the survey but from their responses we could see that they were not employed by the college/university. For example, a couple of respondents were employees of a K-12 school district and thus were deleted from the study. Finally, one person responded that they were willing to complete the survey, but did not know if they were the liaison or not (they were). We believe these initial methodological challenges are important findings. They reveal the need for THECB to distribute an accurate and up-to-date list of campus liaisons and for designated liaisons to have clarity in their roles and responsibilities. An inaccurate list defeats the purpose of publishing a statewide list—for people with experience in foster care to have contact information for a single point of contact that champions their success in higher education.

We distributed surveys to liaisons on 113 campuses and received 66 responses. This represents a 58% response rate. Eight respondents were removed from the data set because they were either K-12 liaisons or they identified as a campus liaison but answered none of the survey questions. This left us with a final sample of 58 (response rate 51%). Survey research experts have recommended a minimum response rate of 50% for analysis, which we were able to meet (Babbie, 2007). In addition, while survey response rates vary widely by topic and industry, recent research reveals the average survey response rate to be 33% (Lindeman, 2019). Thus, we were pleased to be able to have this level of response.

The survey was distributed to the designated liaison for SEFC at each campus. However, in the instructions we informed liaisons that if someone else on their campus was better equipped to answer the questions about services provided to SEFC and had more contact with the SEFC (e.g., a program director for a campus support program), they could forward the survey to that person to complete. Consequently, not all respondents were designated liaisons, although they were the majority of our sample (85%). Through the rest of the manuscript, we refer to the respondents as liaisons given that they are the key point of contact for SEFC on that campus, regardless of whether they are officially or

informally the person who is most directly serving SEFC.

The survey attempted to obtain an in-depth understanding of a number of issues, including; a) specific services offered to SEFC using the Casey Seven Domains (Casey Family Programs, 2006), c) knowledge base of liaisons, d) resources and supports available to liaisons, and e) liaison attitudes toward their role and responsibilities. We conducted quantitative analyses of the liaison survey using SPSS 27.0.

4. Findings

4.1. In-depth interviews with SEFC: Validation for liaison legislation

Several overarching themes emerged from the interviews, a) liaisons are highly valued by SEFC, b) some campuses offer support, but more tailored resources are needed, and c) liaisons/campus support programs have little institutional support.

4.1.1. Liaisons highly valued by SEFC

The key finding from our in-depth interviews was that SEFC want a single point of contact that can either provide services tailored to SEFC or connect them to existing resources. Respondents stated that their liaison (sometimes referred to as their “coach”), often served in this role and was essential to their success in higher education. Their comments provided confirmation of the need for liaison legislation and information about what happens when the liaison program is not implemented as intended.

“Often serving as a motivator, coach, organizer and connector of services, I think for me to have that kind of adult in your corner has been very instrumental in my success. I went to college twice, I like to say, although the first time I went to college, I had to drop out because I just felt alone. I didn't feel like I had anybody there. We didn't have student support services then like they were now, but when I went back there was a community that I felt like I could belong to because of the guidance and leadership of my community college coach.”

“had it not been for the support of my coach and the foster care program there, I can guarantee you I would not be in this place where I am at today....there was this group of folks and this specific person that rallied behind me, just because of my experience in foster care, but also because they genuinely believe that foster youth should be able to succeed in that environment and they did everything possible to make sure that they could support me through it.”

The respondents also emphasized that the liaison had to be “authentic”, someone who really cares about the students:

“one-on-one, so you knew, you created a relationship with this person, you knew that they weren't an advisor for a department or specific area, but they were just there to help you as a foster kid or a foster youth succeed.”

“unless you have an office of foster youth and that specific person that's tailored for that particular thing. I do not believe that people who are not passionate about diversity, equity and inclusion should be in the work and so I do not think that that particular aspect of it should be a catch-all unless it's somebody who's really passionate about the work.”

“a real relationship with the person and that one-on-one kind of attention.”

While our sample size for students was small, we were still able to notice a difference in the experiences of students who had received support from a key point of contact and those who had not. For example, all of the students from high support schools noted that they had been contacted by the campus liaison. These students all spoke positively about these people and services. However, the two students from low support schools had not been contacted by the liaison and they did not know that every campus was supposed to have a liaison for SEFC. For example, when told that every institution has a liaison, one participant responded, “No, no one has reached out to me, I haven't heard anything

about it.” When discussing benefits, all students who had been contacted by their liaison knew about their benefits. During our interviews with students who had no contact from their campus liaison, we found ourselves pausing the interview multiple times to inform them about their foster care benefits. We also spent quite a bit of time following up with students about their benefits and discussing eligibility. When discussing the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) with one participant, they responded, “No, I don’t have—I didn’t know what it was until you said anything.” In addition, students who had not been contacted by the liaison often were in dire need of social and emotional support. One student stated that she was “completely alone”, with no support whatsoever.

4.1.2. Some support services provided, but tailored resources are needed

Respondents at high support schools reported that many of the supports outlined as essential to SEFC in the Casey model (Casey Family Programs, 2006) were provided on their campus (e.g. help accessing financial resources, life skills training, and academic support). They valued these services and appreciated that their liaison helped them access these resources. However, several respondents stated that these services were for the general student population, and they preferred they be tailored to the unique needs of SEFC. In the area of housing, respondents stated:

“I would say, in the realm of housing security for students, so the ability to maybe have more housing on campus for foster youth specifically designated for them, and to support them with at least a portion of some of the rent and stuff like that.”

“If students are going to college, there should be designated dorms set aside for those particular students who have experienced the foster care system at a reduced rate. Especially given that at this particular University, freshmen are required to live on campus.”

In terms of mental health, many respondents wanted someone to “guide you through your care.” or to have mental health support groups available on campus. Some also noted that SEFC have often been medicated while in foster care and may need help managing their medications. All respondents reported that there were no mental health services designed to meet the specific needs of SEFC.

In keeping with the Casey guide, many liaisons reportedly help SEFC make social connections and build social relationships. However, respondents elaborated that they specifically wanted their liaison to connect them to other SEFC. Some liaisons did this, by serving as the advisor to a student organization for SEFC or offering opportunities for SEFC to socialize with one another. This was important to the respondents because they wanted to build a community of peers who had gone through similar experiences and to increase their sense of belonging on campus.

“Whenever I first stepped foot on campus, I felt by myself, I didn’t feel like I belonged, and I didn’t think I was going to make a lot of friends. Then whenever I joined the ‘campus support program’, I was able to become involved with people who understand me and I was able to make friends within them.”

“They give you a sense of feeling like you belong when you go in college, and you’re not out of place. You don’t have to worry about anyone judging you because you have a group of kids who understand what you’ve been through. They’re not going to look at you funny or think nothing of you or put you down. They’re going to empower you to be better than you were raised and what happened to you.”

“We were able to connect with other peers that were foster youth. We were able to provide each other support. If we’re going through a tough time, if we’re having a hard semester, we were able to talk about those things. They also as you attended these activities, they function as kind of a coach, in a way that they were able to feed the motivation and pump me up at times. I think that what it really is, it allows you to continue to have an extension of family, allowed me to continue to have an extended

family at a large campus and university where I was just able to connect with other foster youth that had also been through the system.

4.1.3. Need for more institutional support

While it was not a significant issue for all of the respondents, some talked about the need for more institutional support for SEFC. As discussed, several respondents asked for more tailored services rather than “generic” services, and a few felt that securing institutional support for the liaison/campus support program was a struggle:

“Administrators don’t care”

“I feel like institutionally we do not get the real true need of supporting foster youth and meeting them where they’re at. I say that in the way of like, the resources for theprogram are kind of piecemealed in a department and maybe we’ll have money to pay for a GA, maybe we won’t. If not, we’ll ask and beg for it and plead. Those are the things that I think really harm the program because the institution hasn’t said this is important enough for us.”

“I do think oftentimes it (the program) is just one semester from collapsing.”

In sum, the interviews with SEFC provided broad support for the liaison legislation and confirmed the importance of further study regarding the implementation of the liaison legislation. They provide additional detail on the types of services that are offered and how SEFC would like those services to be constructed. These findings allowed the students’ voices to be represented in the study and informed the design of our quantitative methods. For example, in our website analysis and liaison survey, we made sure to assess all of the Casey domain supports. However, with the input of the SEFC, we learned that we needed to examine additional issues such as whether the campus had a student organization specifically for SEFC, whether liaisons wanted to be in the role and, if liaisons feel their work is supported by their institutions.

4.2. Content analysis of campus websites: Searching for support

Texas legislation requires that all colleges and universities have a designated liaison for SEFC and that contact information for this liaison be provided on the campus website. Thus, we conducted a content analysis of all 113 campus websites to search for this information. We kept our search broad, looking for any person identified as a key point of contact for students who have experienced foster care. Using this broad definition, we still were only able to find the information on the liaison half of the time (51%).

Table 1 also reveals that when liaison information was available, it typically included an email and was easy to find (less than a two-minute search). However, it was rare to find more personal information such as

Table 1
Content analysis of campus websites (n = 113).

	N	%
Information about Liaison		
Yes	58	51.30%
No	55	48.90%
Liaison email		
Yes	56	49.60%
No	57	50.40%
Liaison phone number		
Yes	38	33.60%
No	75	66.40%
Liaison photo		
Yes	13	11.50%
No	100	88.50%
How easy to find liaison information		
Easy to find (less than 2 minutes)	50	44.20%
Somewhat difficult to find (2-5 minutes)	7	6.20%
Very difficult to find (over 5 minutes)	1	0.90%
Could not find	55	51.30%

a photograph of the liaison. The qualitative notes on the coding process revealed that some campuses did not provide liaison contact information but did offer information for SEFC. For example, one campus search led to a page offering services for “foster care alumni”. However, this link led to the university counseling center’s page for those in need of victim services. No additional information specific to foster care (or the foster care liaison) was available on this site. This effort could be viewed as better than no effort at all. However, it reduces the foster care collegiate experience to nothing more than the need for victim services, and it does not adhere to the requirement for liaison contact information.

Table 2 provides a bivariate analysis examining whether institutional characteristics are associated with the provision of liaison information. Results reveal no significant relationships. We also ran a logistic regression analysis which confirms these findings of no significant associations.

In addition, we examined campus websites to determine if a more comprehensive set of services or programming were available for SEFC and how the messaging surrounding available services was framed (Table 3). In essence, we explored websites with the Casey Seven Domains (Casey Family Programs, 2006) as the framework to see what services the program offered. The interviews with SEFC helped us understand which domains were of high importance and additional services/supports desired.

Results reveal that 35% of campus websites indicate that the college or university has a support program for SEFC. The most commonly offered services are assistance with financial, academic, career, and physical/mental health needs. There were very few campuses that provide services related to housing, mentoring, and/or cultural and personal identities.

And even though our in-depth interviews with students indicated a desire to connect with other SEFC on campus, only 18% of campuses reported that they provide opportunities for SEFC to connect with one another and only 13% have a student organization specifically for SEFC. In addition to documenting specific services, we also examined whether strengths-based messaging was included through photos, student success stories, and/or messages of encouragement and hope. Unfortunately, most campuses missed this opportunity to create welcoming and empowering messages for SEFC on their websites.

Table 2
Institutional Characteristics and Liaison Contact Information.

	Liaison Information Provided	Liaison Information Not Provided	P value
Institution Type			
Community College (2 year)	62.1%(36)	63.6%(35)	0.863
4-Year University	37.9% (22)	36.4%(20)	
Institution Size			0.052
<1,000	2.0% (1)	1.9%(1)	
1,000-4,999	24.5%(12)	40.7%(22)	
5,000-9,999	32.7%(16)	14.8%(8)	
10,000-19,999	16.3%(8)	29.6%(16)	
>= 20,000	24.5%(12)	13.0%(7)	
Academic Services per full-time student			0.325
Mean Spending	2311.29(49)	3477.09(54)	
Student Services per full-time student			0.474
Mean Spending	1663.38(48)	1817.96(54)	
Percent undergraduate Latino/a	43.63(49)	39.47(53)	0.324
Percent undergraduate African-American/Black	10.57(49)	11.79(53)	0.628
Percent undergraduate Pell Grant Recipient	36.76(46)	37.64(53)	0.735
Full-time Retention Rate	67.41(39)	61.83(46)	0.052
Graduation Rate	35.04(47)	33.33(49)	0.577

*chi-square and t-tests.

Table 3
Services, Supports, and Messaging.

	n	%
Webpage dedicated to SEFC		
Yes	55	48.70%
No	58	51.30%
Campus Support Program		
Yes	40	35.40%
No	73	64.60%
Types of Services Provided (Direct or Indirect)		
Financial	61	54.50%
Housing	38	33.90%
Academics	52	46.40%
Faculty/Staff Mentoring	20	17.90%
Peer Mentoring (non-SEFC)	12	10.70%
Peer Mentoring (SEFC)	8	7.10%
Career	52	46.40%
Physical Health	47	42.00%
Mental Health	46	41.10%
Personal/Cultural Identity	14	12.50%
Community/Relationships among SEFC	20	17.90%
Student Organization for SEFC	14	12.50%
SEFC Empowering Content		
Photos of students	34	30.40%
Student voice represented	18	16.10%
Strengths-perspective	28	25.00%
Interest in Attending		
No interest	51	45.10%
A little interest	20	17.70%
Moderate interest	22	19.50%
Likely interest	6	5.30%
Strong interest	14	12.40%

The foster scholar research assistant also created a subjective measure of her interest in attending each college, based upon the types of support available and the messaging strategy. It is not surprising that she had no interest in attending almost half of the colleges/universities, given that approximately half offer nothing on their website to assist or encourage SEFC. In addition, she was only strongly interested in 12% of the colleges/universities. Additional analyses of her qualitative comments revealed this level of interest to be strongly associated with campuses that provided an opportunity for SEFC to create their own community of support and which offered strengths-based messages. An additional interesting qualitative finding of our research assistant was that websites varied in terms of whether they spoke to SEFC (second person) or about SEFC (third person). Some campus websites treated SEFC as the intended audience, providing messages of hope and an invitation to join the group of students and faculty already there with statements such as “We look forward to meeting you!”. However, many campus websites focused on justifying the program to others, describing the poor outcomes for SEFC and the need for program services, but never attempting to directly engage with the students themselves.

4.3. Survey of campus Liaisons: The need to help the helpers

From the survey data, we examined the characteristics of the liaisons providing support to SEFC. Table 4 provides this description and includes a comparison with the demographic characteristics of the SEFC enrolled in higher education institutions in Texas (based on a previous study by Watt et al., 2019).

Results reveal that those assisting SEFC are much more likely to be female and white compared to the students they serve. In particular, there is a notable difference in the percentage of respondents who are African-American/Black (4.0) relative to the students served (27.4%). For our final questions on the survey, we wanted to know whether the respondents had experience with foster care and if so, in what way. Results reveal that about one-fifth of respondents have some type of experience with the foster care system. However, no respondent had

Table 4
Characteristics of Liaisons.

	Liaison Survey Respondents %	SEFC in Higher Education in Texas %
Gender Identity		
Female	70	46.61
Male	22	53.39
Non-binary/Other	0	–
Prefer not to answer	8	–
Race/Ethnicity		
White	56	34.95
Black/African-American	4	27.4
Hispanic	30	35.7
Other	10	1.91
Any experience with foster care	19	100
Is/was a foster parent	2	–
Professional role	10	–
Volunteer	10	–
Lived experience in foster care	0	100

lived experience in the foster care system.

Our survey of campus liaisons was also used to garner information about the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of those who were tasked with directly serving SEFC on their campuses. Table 5 provides a summary of key findings from the survey.

Table 5 reveals that the majority of liaisons were housed in the

Table 5
Liaison Survey of Campus Support.

	N	%
Liaison Department		
Student Support Services	28	56.00%
Academic Affairs	4	8.00%
Financial Aid	3	6.00%
Academic Department	2	4.00%
Admissions/Registrar	2	4.00%
Counseling	2	4.00%
Advising	1	2.00%
Athletics	1	2.00%
Other	7	14.00%
How Liaison Identifies SEFC		
Use of Tuition and Fee Waiver	31	53.40%
Students Self-Identify	25	43.10%
Apply Texas Application	22	37.90%
Financial Aid/FAFSA	17	29.30%
DFPS	11	19.00%
Foster Parents	10	17.20%
Very or Somewhat Familiar with SEFC Issues		
Tuition Waiver	47	92.10%
ETV	41	80.40%
Supervised Independent Living	34	66.70%
Extended Foster Care	34	68.00%
Medicaid	27	52.90%
Foster Care System	37	72.60%
Mental Health & Trauma-Informed Care	37	72.60%
Received Training for Role		
Yes	23	52.30%
No	21	47.70%
Want More Training		
Yes	42	95.50%
No	2	4.50%
Wanted to be Liaison		
Yes	38	88.40%
No	5	11.60%
Other Duties Reduced		
Yes	3	7.00%
No	40	93.00%
Campus Administrators		
Supportive	37	75.50%
Unsupportive	6	12.20%
Unaware of Role	6	12.20%

department of Student Support Services (56%). However, almost half are dispersed in a diverse array of departments including Admissions, Financial Aid, Academic Affairs, Advising, Counseling, Athletics, and one academic department (Social Work), an indication that campuses vary considerably in terms of who is assigned the role of the liaison.

Respondents were asked how they identify SEFC on their campuses. The most common way is through identifying those students who use the foster care tuition and fee waiver. This is a useful strategy, however, not all SEFC qualify for or use the waiver. The preferred option is to use information from the Apply Texas application, which asks if a student had experienced foster care. Table 5 reveals that almost two-thirds (62%) of campuses do not use the available Apply Texas data, even though it is the most comprehensive strategy available for identifying SEFC.

The survey also assessed liaison familiarity with topics relevant to serving SEFC. Table 5 reveals the percentage of respondents that reported that they were very familiar or somewhat familiar with each topic. Findings indicate that liaisons were most familiar with the tuition and fee waiver (92%). Most respondents were at least somewhat (or very) familiar with every topic listed. However, it is concerning that there were a sizable number of liaisons (8%-20%) that weren't familiar at all with the most important financial resources available for SEFC attending post-secondary institutions (tuition waivers and ETV).

The interviews with SEFC solidified the importance of having a foster care liaison, and clarified that the liaison needs to be a person who is passionate about the role. Fortunately, approximately nine out of ten respondents (88%) reported that they wanted to be the foster care liaison. However, less than one in ten (7%) got their duties reduced so they could take on the role. The data also show a lack of training and minimal support for the liaisons. Slightly more than half of respondents report that they have received training on how to serve SEFC (52.3%) and a notable 95.5% of respondents stated that they would like more training regarding how to serve as the foster care liaison. To reinforce these data, one liaison expressed the need for, "...more training to understand the role and how to help students." As stated in an open-ended response by one liaison, "I feel like this will need to be a completely separate job instead of a side title." In addition, one in four (24.4%) felt that their campus administrators were either unsupportive or unaware of their work. When asked about what they needed to perform their role as the liaison and/or to help SEFC succeed, one liaison shared, "All support is needed. I have no help and support at this time." To the same question, another liaison expressed the need for, "More support from campus administrators." Other needs liaisons expressed were; "Extra time", "Funding to provide students with programming", and "Time and money".

5. Discussion

In 2015 the Texas legislature mandated that every college and university have a designated liaison for SEFC. Follow-up legislation (2019) required that contact information for this liaison be listed on the campus website and that liaisons proactively reach out to the SEFC on their campuses to offer support. Our research reveals that the Texas liaison legislation has to some extent been successfully implemented. All campuses have identified a liaison to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and half of these colleges and universities (51%) have identified the liaison on their websites. In addition, we interviewed several students who had received support from a campus liaison. They valued the assistance and saw it as critical to their success. It is important to acknowledge these accomplishments and the role of state policy in achieving them. However, we also need to present the other "glass half empty" version of the story. Our findings reveal that many colleges and universities have not adequately responded to the call of policy makers, practitioners, and advocates to offer support for SEFC. The list of liaisons obtained from THECB contains individuals not employed by the college/university and some of the liaisons listed did not even know

they were the designated point of contact for SEFC. In addition, half (49%) of the campuses provide no liaison contact information on their websites, a violation of HB 1702. Further, the majority of liaisons report that they do not access the most comprehensive data source available for identifying the SEFC on their campuses. These data give us reason to believe that many liaisons are not connecting with the students they are supposed to serve. Supporting this hypothesis, some students we interviewed had not been contacted by their liaison and did not know their campus had a liaison for SEFC. One of these students reported that she was “totally alone” on her campus. This student’s comment is only a single anecdotal piece of information, but it is also a painful personification of the disconnect between policy and practice. Further, the liaisons themselves reveal that they are struggling in their roles. The overwhelming majority report that they wanted to be the liaison, but only half received training and less than one in ten had their other job duties reduced to give them time to adequately fulfill the role. Many SEFC requested additional, more tailored services and the liaisons confirm that they need additional resources to fulfill their role. Unfortunately, one in four report that their administrators are either unaware or unsupportive of their work with SEFC.

The present study is limited in many ways. It only provides descriptive information on policy and programming in Texas and thus cannot reveal what occurs in other states. We also were only able to gather indirect evidence (through websites) of what is occurring on all campuses and our liaison survey results are likely affected by non-response and self-reporting bias. However, we believe individual states, like Texas, can serve as incubators of innovative strategies for policy and practice. The Texas liaison program is an example of a unique policy initiative to support SEFC. We believe our investigation provides a useful preliminary look at the viability of this particular approach and lessons learned from the initial program launch. Much of the campus support movement has been a grassroots movement, which gives it incredible power and authenticity. However, it is time for existing social structures and institutions to more formally support this effort. To that end we must begin to examine not only the CSPs that have emerged organically, but also specific legislative policy initiatives that aim to institutionalize campus support for SEFC. The present study opens an avenue into this line of inquiry.

The Texas liaison legislation was arguably an important first step to get all campuses to offer some degree of support to SEFC. However, we acknowledge that this is just the beginning. Existing research also tells us that we have to drill down into the CSP movement to identify how to best serve these students. For example, researchers have identified potential barriers to participating in CSPs such as a hesitancy to be identified based on their foster care history (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013), a lack of awareness of available services (Huang, et al, 2019), or avoidant attachment styles that reduce help-seeking (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Okpych and colleagues (2020) conducted a detailed investigation of CSP participation in an effort to quantify predictors of participation. They examined a wide range of variables including demographics, foster care history, educational background, mental health, social support, and higher education and community characteristics. However, they were only able to identify two factors that predicted participation, being in foster care after the age of 18 and attending a four-year compared to a two-year institution. Their comprehensive analysis was an excellent addition to the literature, yet their findings indicate that more research, quantitative and qualitative, is needed to understand why some students utilize CSPs while others forgo these opportunities. We also need to identify the most/least useful services so that support program models are effective and efficient. For example, students repeatedly state that they would like to develop connections to those with similar backgrounds, identities, and experiences (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Strayhorn, 2021; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). The SEFC we interviewed shared this desire. However, these components were those least likely to be found in the campus support programs we found in Texas. The vast majority of campus support initiatives did not have a student

organization for SEFC, had no services to assist students in connecting with SEFC, and none of the liaisons we interviewed had lived experience in the foster care system.

6. Conclusion

Campus support programming and policy has the potential to transform higher education outcomes for SEFC. Ground-breaking programs such as the USC Guardian Scholars and the Western Michigan Seita Scholars programs provided information and inspiration to other states and schools regarding how to support SEFC in higher education. Consequently, many campuses, stakeholders, and legislators took up the charge to create campus support for SEFC. While these initiatives are admirable, accolades are premature. There is reason to believe that many of these campus support initiatives fall short of the pioneering programs that inspired them, which are comprehensive, coordinated, and adequately funded. Our study demonstrates that an unfunded mandate for a single support person may fall short. State resources also need to be allocated for staff time, training, and resources for the support systems established. Finally, we offer what has been said by many other researchers, that evaluation is needed, but sorely lacking in the research on campus support (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger, et al., 2018; Okpych, et al., 2020; Randolph & Thompson, 2017). Consequently, current and future initiatives need to include process and outcome evaluations in order to provide a feedback loop for course correction, document program impact, and ultimately, identify best-practices for the design and implementation of campus supports for SEFC.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Toni Watt reports financial support was provided by Greater Texas Education Foundation.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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