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Engaging with Leaders Who Have Experienced Foster Care: A Toolkit



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FOR CHILDREN'S POLICY,
PRACTICE & RESEARCH



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This toolkit serves as a guide for how to best engage with people who have experienced foster care - particularly in the context of higher education advocacy - along with resources that can be shared with others to cultivate a supportive environment.

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As of 2020, more than 300,000 children in the United States are involved in the foster care system.¹

Higher Education Opportunities

More than 12,000 children were emancipated, or “aged out” of the foster care system, with a large majority left without the support necessary for success.²

Although **more than 80%** of students in foster care aspire to go to college, they attend at **less than half** the rate of their peers.³ **Fewer than half** of enrolled students who have had experience with the foster care system make it through their first year of college, with **less than 10%** obtaining a 2 year degree, **less than 5%** obtaining a 4 year degree, and **less than 1%** obtaining a master's.⁴

1. (2023). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-30.pdf>

2. Ibid.

3. (n.d.). (2022). Exploring education outcomes: What research tells us. *Legal Center for Foster Care and Education*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63dcf65b8d0c56709027332e/t/65206d213728bb028bee2ee8/1696623910191/Education%2BOutcomes%2Bfinal-combined.pdf>

4. Ibid.

Low college enrollment and completion rates among those with experience in foster care is a **public policy concern**, and is indicative of **the need for more robust supports**.

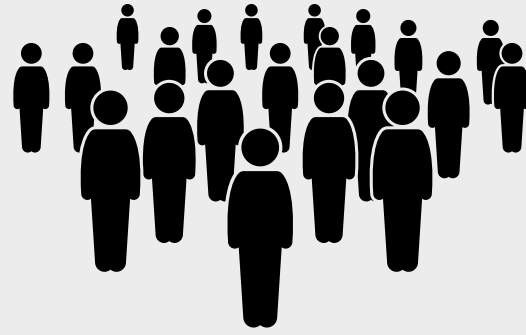
The Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice, and Research supports the initiative: Foster Care to College (FC2C): Fostering Success for the Future. FC2C focuses on this need in Pennsylvania as they:

- support higher education institutions in the development of campus-based support programs for students with foster care experience
- conduct research
- advocate for local and national policy change
- **provide professional development or educational events**



When engaging with students who have foster care experience for events, there is always a risk of harm being done to stakeholders, due to systemic factors of oppression. Thus, it is important to be intentional and well-informed on each level of engagement.

important principles prior to engagement



WHETHER IT IS FOR RESEARCH, AN EVENT, OR OTHER KNOWLEDGE SHARING PURPOSES, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO CONSIDER HOW YOU CAN **AVOID REPLICATING THE EXTRACTIVIST LOGIC IN YOUR PRACTICE.**

FOR RESEARCHERS AND ORGANIZATIONS, **THE EXTRACTIVIST LOGIC** CAN BE DEFINED AS **UTILIZING THE KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, AND STORIES FROM COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN DISREGARDED, MARGINALIZED, AND OPPRESSED** WITH METHODS THAT **REPLICATE THE SAME EXPLOITATIVE PRACTICES** THAT HAVE HISTORICALLY HARMED THEM.⁵

Prior to engaging with individuals who have lived experience, it is critical that you orient yourself in anti-extractivist principles. This helps reduce potentially extractivist reasons for engagement, as well as establishes a person-centered, social-justice oriented foundation for future participants.

5. Gorman, J. (2024). Beyond extractivism in research with communities and movements. The Commons Social Change Library. <https://commonslibrary.org/beyond-extractivism-in-research-with-communities-and-movements/#:~:text=Extractivist%20research%20'mines'%20for%20data,for%20presentation%20to%20external%20audiences.>

Engaging with Leaders with Lived Experience: Guiding Principles

Reflect on your positionality and critically interrogate your intentions⁶

- How does your identity influence your reasons for engagement?
- How does your positionality inform the framework your questions are being formed in?
- Whose interests does this serve and how?
- In what ways, if at all, has the need for this work been presented by the community you are engaging with?

Develop deep relational accountability⁷

- Who are you accountable to?
- How will you sustain the principles of accountability and mutuality as you engage with this community?

6. Gorman, J. (2024). Beyond extractivism in research with communities and movements. The Commons Social Change Library. <https://commonslibrary.org/beyond-extractivism-in-research-with-communities-and-movements/#:~:text=Extractivist%20research%20'mines'%20for%20data,for%20presentation%20to%20external%20audiences.>

7. Ibid.

Guiding Principles

Expand your ethical considerations⁸

- **What does informed consent look like and how can you uphold that throughout this work?**
- **What does confidentiality and ethical compensation look like?**
- **What research plans and protocols already exist to protect those involved in this work?**
- **How have protocols been amended to fit the more specific needs of different participating individuals?**



8. Global Early Adolescent Study & Save the Children. (n.d.). Ethics in research and programming with adolescents: Capturing the perspectives of international organizations. John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-09/ethicsinresearchandprogrammingwithadolescents-capturingtheperspectivesofinter.pdf>

Guiding Principles

Balance introspective reflection with relationship building⁹

- **If you have never engaged with this community before, how will you best prepare and educate yourself before doing so?**
- **How will education and preparation be done through an anti-oppressive lens?**
- **What processes could be put in place to create ongoing dialogue and support between your organization and the community you are engaging with?**

Make relevant and reciprocal contributions¹⁰

- **What direct and immediate benefits you can offer in service to the community you are engaging with?**
- **How, if at all, can this work generate knowledge that has collective community benefits and advances community goals?**

9. Gorman, J. (2024). Beyond extractivism in research with communities and movements. The Commons Social Change Library. <https://commonslibrary.org/beyond-extractivism-in-research-with-communities-and-movements/#:~:text=Extractivist%20research%20'mines'%20for%20data,for%20presentation%20to%20external%20audiences.>

10. Ibid.

engaging directly with leaders with lived experience

When actively engaging with people who have foster care experience, it is important to prioritize the principles of **autonomy, authenticity, informed consent, confidentiality, and compensation.**

Moreover, consistently utilizing a **trauma-informed** and **culturally responsive lens** can mitigate potential risks and harm, such as re-traumatizing the people you are collaborating with.¹¹

11. Grossman, S., Cooper, Z., Buxton, H., Hendrickson, S., Lewis-O'Connor, A., Stevens, J., Wong, L. Y., & Bonne, S. (2021). Trauma-informed care: recognizing and resisting re-traumatization in health care. Trauma surgery & acute care open, 6(1), e000815. <https://doi.org/10.1136/tsaco-2021-000815>

A **trauma-informed** approach is an orientation that works to **fully recognize how an individual's specific needs, behavior, and responses** have been shaped by their previous **traumatic experience(s)**.¹²

Together, both of these approaches support participants who have been impacted by various stressors in receiving holistic treatment.

A **culturally responsive** approach also actively **recognizes how culture shapes an individual's experiences and perspective**, while simultaneously **honoring that individual's culture when engaging** with them.¹³

12. Kisiel, C., Pauter, S., Ocampo, A., Stokes, C., & Bruckner, E. (2021). Trauma-informed guiding principles for working with transition age youth: Provider fact sheet. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.
<https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma-informed-guiding-principles-for-working-with-transition-age-youth-provider-fact-sheet.pdf>

13. Ibid.

Guiding Principles

Prioritize the autonomy of participants¹⁴

- **Always give them choice: in whether to participate; what they would like to share; how they would like to share knowledge and with whom; etc.**
- **Ask them what they want, be guided by their responses, and meet their requests if possible**
- **Respect their boundaries, honor their preferences, and follow through on actions that would create a safe environment for them**
- **Be honest about the limitations of your work or your institution; allow participants to determine if they would like to contribute to such an environment once they know the stipulations**

14. Kisiel, C., Pauter, S., Ocampo, A., Stokes, C., & Bruckner, E. (2021). Trauma-informed guiding principles for working with transition age youth: Provider fact sheet. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma-informed-guiding-principles-for-working-with-transition-age-youth-provider-fact-sheet.pdf>

Guiding Principles

Discuss mutual respect¹⁵

- **View participants as a whole individual, including their cultures, perspectives, behaviors, and experiences, from a non-judgmental stance**
- **Be mindful to not pry nor ask them to relive their traumatic experience by answering intrusive questions. If brought up, let them lead the conversation and be mindful of questions about specific details/events**
- **Recognize the power dynamics at play and work to level them; decision-making should be collaborative**



15 Kisiel, C., Pauter, S., Ocampo, A., Stokes, C., & Bruckner, E. (2021). Trauma-informed guiding principles for working with transition age youth: Provider fact sheet. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma-informed-guiding-principles-for-working-with-transition-age-youth-provider-fact-sheet.pdf>

Guiding Principles

Build trust¹⁶

- **Be fully honest about each aspect of the work being done, so participants know exactly what they are consenting to**
- **Thoroughly discuss all norms and expectations of their participation**
- **Welcome questions and challenges around your work from them; answer them with transparency and compassion**
- **Understand that participants may be hesitant to engage, due to previous negative experiences with other systems and institutions; thus building trust may take longer and look different from your own cultural understanding**
- **Develop trust through authenticity, transparency, consistency, and dependability**
- **Create a positive, effective, and open communication process**

16. Kisiel, C., Pauter, S., Ocampo, A., Stokes, C., & Bruckner, E. (2021). Trauma-informed guiding principles for working with transition age youth: Provider fact sheet. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma-informed-guiding-principles-for-working-with-transition-age-youth-provider-fact-sheet.pdf>

Guiding Principles

Maintain confidentiality

- **Develop clear guidelines on keeping participants' information private that can be effectively implemented**
- **Consult with participants about what they would prefer to not share and how they would specifically like to share other forms of knowledge**

Identify Individual needs¹⁷

- **Consistently demonstrate an authentic desire to learn from participants, as well as listen and respond to their needs and preferences**
- **Commit to developing a culturally responsive lens via learning about individual experience of historical trauma, racial trauma, differences in culture, and other historically oppressed factors of identity**

17. Kiesel, C., Pauter, S., Ocampo, A., Stokes, C., & Bruckner, E. (2021). Trauma-informed guiding principles for working with transition age youth: Provider fact sheet. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma-informed-guiding-principles-for-working-with-transition-age-youth-provider-fact-sheet.pdf>

Guiding Principles

Utilize a trauma-informed and culturally responsive lens¹⁸

- **Recognizing how your cultural identity influences your understanding and orientation to others**
- **Unlearning your own implicit biases, as well as challenging and rejecting oppressive interpretations of other cultures**
- **Individualizing the participant you are engaging with**
- **Maximizing participants' sense of safety and trust**
- **Applying strengths-based practices, which means acknowledging that participants are doing the best they can with the resources and experiences they have**

18. Kisiel, C., Pauter, S., Ocampo, A., Stokes, C., & Bruckner, E. (2021). Trauma-informed guiding principles for working with transition age youth: Provider fact sheet. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma-informed-guiding-principles-for-working-with-transition-age-youth-provider-fact-sheet.pdf>

HEAR DIRECTLY FROM LEADERS WITH FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE WHO HAVE ENGAGED IN EDUCATIONAL EVENTS WITH INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS ON WHAT HAS BEEN POSITIVELY IMPACTFUL:

“Investing in an expansive network that connects all the participants with foster care experience to one another would be great. Not only will it be a continuous resource for fosters pre-college, but also a resource for those committed to working tirelessly for foster’s rights and interests.”

Main themes: uplifting community, fostering connection, supporting concrete resources, and commitment to the rights of youth in foster care

HEAR DIRECTLY FROM PEOPLE WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE ON WHAT HAS BEEN POSITIVELY IMPACTFUL:

“Staff & faculty should never assume that all students have a supporting, loving family or someone to rely on. They often make blanket comments or set expectations for students that are not feasible. It’s important for all staff and faculty to participate in a training on how to work with students who are low-income, housing insecure, or have experienced foster care. Moreover, just being there, being a listener, and making students feel heard is the best course of action — instead of just coming up with events yourself, ask students to contribute their ideas on what they would like to participate in.”

Main themes: the importance of examining your own biases, intentionally seeking out trainings to adequately prepare for engaging with marginalized students, being an active listener, giving students autonomy while uplifting their voices

**BEYOND THIS TOOLKIT FOR THOSE ORGANIZING AND
FACILITATING THE WORK BEING DONE, IT IS ALSO
HELPFUL TO SHARE RESOURCES THAT EQUIP
STAKEHOLDERS AND AUDIENCE MEMBERS WITH THE
NECESSARY TOOLS FOR A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.**

SEE THE FOLLOWING PAGES FOR THE HANDOUTS



Planting the seeds for
equitable, thoughtful
engagement

Opening up about yourself can be challenging, but you don't have to do it alone.
It is courageous to both speak up and prioritize your well-being.

Tips For Sharing Personal Experiences With Others

be yourself

Be authentic and share only what you truly want to. Others should respect & accommodate your personal limits.



Explore what you feel comfortable sharing and how it might best inform others. Prepping for this experience can make it feel less overwhelming.



Take time to yourself and do something that brings you joy. Sharing your lived experience is a large action and you need the space to recharge.



Identify experiences that you do not want to talk about and communicate them to others, so they know what is and is not appropriate to ask you.



Connect with others who you share similar ground with. It could foster mutual guidance and support, as well as be the start to a great friendship!



We are always a resource to you if you ever need support! Feel free to reach out to us at the Field Center:
fieldctr@sp2.upenn.edu



Utilize your college's or community's counseling services, which are often free and confidential; they can also set you up with long-term mental health support.



General Resources:

- > Call or text 988 (a suicide & crisis lifeline)
- > TrevorSpace (an online community for LGBTQ+ youth)
- > Open Path Collective (a site to find affordable, long term counseling)



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TIPS FOR ENGAGEMENT AS AN AUDIENCE MEMBER



**LISTEN TO PARTICIPANTS WITH THE
INTENT OF LEARNING, NOT RESPONDING**



**REFRAIN FROM ASKING QUESTIONS
ABOUT SPECIFIC, SITUATIONAL DETAILS**



**RESPECT PARTICIPANT'S AUTONOMY AND
DECISION TO NOT ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS**



**TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR YOUR
ACTIONS AND ANY HARM CAUSED**



**UPLIFT PARTICIPANTS AS THEY SHARE
KNOWLEDGE AND THEIR EXPERIENCE**



**CONTINUE YOUR LEARNING BEYOND
THIS EVENT AND BE PROACTIVE ABOUT
ENGAGING WITH THIS COMMUNITY**

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Questions?

Contact the Field Center

Website: fieldcenteratpenn.org

Email: fieldctr@sp2.upenn.edu



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