

Memo from CaYOUTH

Memo from CaYOUTH: Colleges Most Frequently Attended by Older Youth in California Foster Care

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Introduction

A number of factors influence the college a young person ultimately chooses to attend. Some of these factors include their academic performance and interests, information available to them about colleges, advice from family and peers, high school culture and resources, estimated cost, and proximity (Black et al., 2020; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Studies have shown that, aside from student differences, the college that a student attends plays a role in their likelihood of remaining in college and ultimately earning a degree (see, for example, Kang & García Torres, 2021; Ovink et al., 2018; Shamsuddin, 2016). For example, nationally, about 54% of first-time students who enrolled in a 2-year public college in fall 2018 returned to that same college in fall 2019. This is lower than the 76% of students in 4-year public colleges who returned to the same college a year later (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020)

Increasing attention has been given to “undermatching,” which occurs when a student enrolls in a college for which they are overqualified, based on their academic credentials (Ovink et al., 2018). An example is a student who enrolled in a 2-year college or a minimally selective 4-year college even though their high school GPA and standardized test scores would have met the admissions criteria for a more selective 4-year college. Low-income students and students who are first in their families to enroll in college have a lower supply of individuals with college knowledge and resources. As a result, these students are more likely to be undermatched (Roderick et al., 2011). An earlier CaYOUTH memo estimated that about one in six participants who enrolled in college by their early 20s were undermatched, based on their reading proficiency scores

at age 17 and the college they attended (Torres-García et al., 2019). The most common scenario was youth who enrolled in a 2-year college when they could have likely been admitted to a 4-year college. Another study of foster care alumni in three Midwestern states estimated that nearly one in three youth who enrolled in college were undermatched (Okpych, 2021).

Previous CalYOUTH memos suggest that the overwhelming majority (upwards of 85%) of youth in California foster care who go to college first attend an in-state, public, 2-year college (Okpych et al., 2019; Okpych et al., 2021). The current memo takes a closer look at the types of colleges that foster youth enroll in, including average retention rates and the number of semesters completed at those institutions. The findings yield important insights on the types of colleges California foster youth most commonly attend and the differences between college types in student demographics and short-term outcomes.

Methods

Data Sources and Samples

Data for this analysis came from the California Department of Social Services' Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS). The original population of interest included about 113,500 youths in California foster care on or after their 16th birthday for at least 8 days between 2006 and 2019. We obtained National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)¹ data for these young people in May 2019, which provided term-by-term information on the colleges they enrolled in up to that point. Of all the youth in the sample, NSC had college records for 52,861 youths; however, records were blocked for 6,448 of these youths, and neither their identities nor their college records were available to CalYOUTH. Thus, the results below are missing some CalYOUTH participants who had enrolled in college but for whom NSC data were not available, and this would result in an undercount of the college attendance rate for our sample.

The focus of the current memo includes a subsample of youth from the larger population that met the following criteria: (1) the youth was in care on their 18th birthday, (2) the youth's 18th birthday was after January 1, 2012 (that is, they were potentially eligible for extended foster care [EFC] through the California assembly bill that established EFC, AB12), (3) the youth enrolled in college sometime between their 17th and 21st birthdays, (4) the youth was at least 21 years old at the time of the NSC data draw in

¹ The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit and nongovernmental organization that provides enrollment and graduation records for more than 3,600 participating colleges and universities in the U.S. (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019a). NSC records account for about 97% of all currently enrolled students and nearly 99% of all postsecondary education institutions (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019b). NSC includes all types of postsecondary education institutions, including in-state and out-of-state schools, 2-year and 4-year schools, and public and private schools. The NSC also includes trade and vocational schools.

May 2019, and (5) the youth was in child welfare-supervised foster care.² A total of 7,997 youths met these five criteria. These young people first enrolled in 515 distinct college campuses, which includes 217 institutions in California and 298 out-of-state institutions across the U.S.

Presentation of Findings for Groups of Colleges

This memo's primary focus is on the first college in which youth in the sample had enrolled. We classified the 515 colleges into four main categories: California public 2-year colleges, California public 4-year colleges, California private colleges, and out-of-state colleges. The overwhelming majority of youth first enrolled in one of California's 116 public 2-year colleges. Thus, we further classified California public 2-year colleges into quartiles, based on the number of youths in the sample who had enrolled in the college. The top quartile included the 28 2-year colleges with the highest enrollments of foster youth, while the bottom quartile included the 29 2-year colleges with the lowest enrollments of foster youth. The two middle quartiles ($n = 28$ colleges each) include schools that were in between the two extremes of number of foster youths who enrolled as their first school.

For the public 4-year colleges attended by youth in the sample, we report results separately for campuses in the California State University system (CalState) and campuses in the University of California system (UC). Compared to the CalState campuses, the UC campuses place a stronger emphasis on research and theory-based education, have more stringent admissions criteria, and accept smaller percentages of applicants. The third category, California private colleges, is separated into 2-year colleges and 4-year colleges. Similarly, for the fourth category of out-of-state colleges, results are presented separately for 2-year and 4-year schools.

We will explore differences between these ten college groups, which include California 2-year public colleges, California 4-year public colleges, California private colleges, and out-of-state colleges.

Measures and Presentation of Findings

The tables and figure in this brief provide a snapshot of the college groups. We present information on the number and percentage of foster youth who enrolled in each college group. We also present the gender and racial/ethnic breakdown of youth in the sample who attended colleges in each group. Two short-term college outcomes are also explored: retention and number of completed semesters. Our retention measure calculates the average percentage of students who completed their first two consecutive nonsummer semesters at their first college up to their 21st birthday (e.g., the fall 2015 and spring 2016 semesters). Our measure of completed semesters calculates the average number of semesters completed at a student's first college up to their 21st birthday.³

² There were an additional 1,636 youths who met criteria 1–4 but who were in probation-supervised foster care. These youth were not included in the present analyses.

³ For colleges that do not follow a semester calendar system, we converted their term measure to semester equivalents (e.g., 3 trimesters = 2 semesters).

For most of the measures, we analyzed data based on the full sample of 7,997 students who first attended 515 colleges. However, the retention measure is based on 7,942 students who first attended 511 colleges. A few students from the sample ($n = 55$) were excluded because they first enrolled in college less than two semesters before the NSC data were obtained. This would not have provided sufficient time to assess whether the student remained enrolled for their first two semesters.

Findings

Table 1 presents findings on the 515 colleges that youth in the sample first enrolled in, including California public 2-year colleges (orange), California public 4-year colleges (blue), California private colleges (green), and out-of-state colleges (yellow). The third column displays the percentage of students in the sample who first enrolled in each college group. By far, California public 2-year colleges were the most attended institutions, with 82.2% of students first enrolling in one of these schools. Indeed, the 28 colleges in the top quartile of California 2-year public colleges account for nearly half (44.8%) of all youth first enrolled in college. About 1 in 10 youth in the sample (9.7%) first enrolled in a California public 4-year college. About five times as many youths in the sample attended a CalState school (8.2%) than a UC school (1.5%). Very few youths first enrolled in a California private college as their first institution (2.1%), and slightly more than 1 in 20 youth (6.2%) went out of state for college.

The middle columns in the table display a breakdown of the gender and race/ethnicity composition of students in each school group. To understand how students in each group compare to the entire sample of students, it is useful to compare the number in a given cell with the number in the gray-shaded cell at the top of the column. For example, the gray-shaded cell in the “Female” column indicates that 61.3% of all students ($n = 7,997$) were female. In comparison, a larger share of students in UC campuses (72.3%) and CalState campuses (69.5%) were female. Conversely, current and former foster youth attending the bottom quartile of California public 2-year colleges were less likely to be female (54.3%) than was the case for the overall population of current and former foster youth that ever attended college (61.3%).

In terms of race and ethnicity, about 28% of all students were Black, 23% were White, 3% were Asian/Pacific Islander, less than 1% were Native American, 6% were multiracial, and 40% were Hispanic.⁴ The findings suggest that, relative to their overall percentage of current and former foster youth attending college (27.5%), Black youth are underrepresented in the California public 2-year colleges in

⁴ The original race variable was missing information for about 1 in 5 youth (18%), nearly all of whom were identified as Hispanic in the ethnicity variable. Thus, it was not possible to analyze race and ethnicity separately without losing about one-fifth of the sample when analyzing race alone. We created a single variable that combined information on the youth’s race and ethnicity, which includes the following categories: White, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Alaskan Native, multiracial, and Hispanic. If a youth was identified as being Hispanic in the administrative variable about ethnicity, the youth was coded as Hispanic in the composite race/ethnicity variable.

the bottom quartiles (18.9% and 18.6%) and in UC schools (16.1%). However, Black youth are overrepresented in out-of-state 4-year colleges (38.5%). This latter finding may be explained, in part, by Black youth choosing to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that were out of state. Among the Black youth who enrolled in an out-of-state 4-year college ($n = 115$), nearly two in five (38.3%) attended an HBCU. White youth (23.2% of all students) are somewhat overrepresented in public 2-year colleges in the bottom two quartiles (27.6% and 30.6%), as well as 4-year private colleges (29.6%) and 2-year out-of-state schools (28.0%). Asian and Pacific Islander students are overrepresented in CalState campuses (6.3%) and UC campuses (18.6%) relative to their percentage of all students (3.3%), and they are underrepresented in out-of-state colleges. Multiracial youth make up 5.6% of all students and are underrepresented in UC campuses (2.5%) but overrepresented in California 2-year colleges (10.1%). Hispanic youth are fairly evenly represented across college groups, except for 2-year private colleges in California (50.7%), where they are overrepresented, and 4-year, out-of-state schools, where they are underrepresented. The former finding should be interpreted cautiously. Very few youth attended California private 2-year schools (less than 1% of the sample). Similarly, findings regarding Native American youth should be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of youths in this sample.

The two columns on the right of Table 1 display the retention rates and the average number of semesters completed by age 21 for students in each college group. Among all 7,942 students for whom retention could be assessed, the average retention rate is about 44%. On average, the 7,997 students in the sample completed about 2.2 semesters. The retention rates and the number of semesters completed varied between the college groups. Students in 4-year schools had higher retention rates and greater numbers of semesters completed than students in 2-year schools. The retention rates for the four quartiles of California public 2-year colleges hovered around 40%, and students in those schools completed about two semesters by age 21. The retention rate for students in California public 4-year colleges (roughly 79%) was about double the rate of public 2-year colleges. Students in public 4-year colleges also completed more semesters by their 21st birthday—about 3.6 semesters for CalState campuses and 4.4 for UC campuses. The retention rates for students attending private colleges in California were considerably lower than the retention rates of their in-state public counterparts. Two-year private colleges had an average 2-semester completion rate of 21% (versus about 40% for public colleges), and the rate at 4-year private colleges was about 60% (versus about 79% for public colleges). The outcomes for students in out-of-state 2-year colleges were similar to that of California public 2-year colleges. However, outcomes for students in out-of-state 4-year colleges were worse than outcomes for students in California 4-year colleges (both public and private). Slightly more than half of

Table 1. College Groups: School-Level Student Characteristics and Outcomes (n = 7,997 students)

	Number of schools	Number of students enrolled	% of all enrolled students	Female	Black	White	Asian/Pacific Islander	Native American	Multiracial	Hispanic	Retention rate ^a	Average number of semesters completed
	n	N	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	Mean (SD)
Total	515	7,997	100.0	61.3	27.5	23.2	3.3	0.7	5.6	39.8	44.4	2.21 (1.77)
CA public 2-year colleges												
Top quartile (most attended)	28	3,579	44.8	58.7	29.5	22.6	2.5	0.8	6.1	38.5	40.0	2.04 (1.62)
Middle top quartile	28	1,773	22.2	62.2	28.8	20.9	3.0	0.2	4.7	42.4	39.3	1.95 (1.60)
Middle bottom quartile	28	838	10.5	61.3	18.9	27.6	3.5	1.0	5.1	44.1	41.4	2.00 (1.61)

Table 1, cont'd

Bottom quartile (least attended)	29	376	4.7	54.3	18.6	30.6	4.3	1.9	5.3	39.4	37.8	2.06 (1.74)
CA public 4-year Colleges												
CalState	23	652	8.2	69.5	27.4	20.0	6.3	0.5	5.8	40.1	79.0	3.63 (2.00)
UC	9	119	1.5	72.3	16.1	25.4	18.6	0.9	2.5	36.4	78.8	4.44 (1.91)
CA Private Colleges												
2-year	25	69	0.9	81.2	21.7	14.5	1.5	1.5	10.1	50.7	20.6	1.26 (1.46)
4-year	47	98	1.2	77.5	26.5	29.6	3.1	0.0	3.1	37.8	59.8	3.20 (2.23)
Out-of-State Colleges												
2-year	130	193	2.4	58.6	25.9	28.0	1.6	0.0	6.7	37.8	45.0	1.90 (1.49)
4-year	168	300	3.8	65.3	38.5	24.1	2.3	0.3	6.4	28.4	53.5	2.57 (2.09)

the students attending 4-year colleges outside of California completed their first two consecutive semesters (54%) and completed about 2.6 semesters on average, a whole semester less than students at CalState schools.

Since most youth attended public colleges in California, Figure 1 takes a closer look at these schools' retention rates. In particular, we look at variation *between colleges* in their retention rates. The pie chart on the left visually depicts the percentage of students in the entire sample who enrolled in a college within each college group. The right side of the figure displays a series of box-and-whisker charts. In a chart, the line in the center of each box displays the median retention rate (that is, the retention rate that is the middle value of schools in that college group). The box displays where the middle 50% of college retention rates fall, and the lines at the end of the whiskers display the lowest and highest retention rates for that college group.

The first four box-and-whisker charts display the ranges of retention rates at the California public 2-year colleges. The median retention rate for the first (41.8%) and third (44.6%) quartiles are slightly higher than the medians for the second (38.8%) and fourth (37.5%) quartiles. Additionally, there is more variability in retention rates among colleges in the bottom quartile than the top three quartiles. About 4.7% of all students enrolled in the bottom quartile of California public 2-year schools. The variability is partly due to the small sample sizes of some of the colleges in the fourth quartile; the retention rates for some schools are based on only a handful of students.⁵ Indeed, one college, represented by the orange dot, had a retention rate of 100%, but this is based on just one student.

The median retention rates for the two California public university systems are presented in blue at the bottom of the figure. The median retention rates are comparable in these two systems, hovering around 82–83%. There was greater variation in the UC retention rates, in part because of the smaller number of students who had enrolled in each campus. Two CalState campuses had particularly low retention rates for youth in the sample who first enrolled there; one college was based on just two students (50% retention rate), and the other was based on 39 students (44.7% retention rate).

⁵ Having few students enrolled in a college limits the possible values of the average retention rate for that college. For example, if only two students enrolled in a college, there are only three possible retention rate values for that college: 0%, 50%, and 100%. If three students enrolled, there are only four possible values: 0%, 33%, 67%, and 100%. A larger number of students makes the estimate more precise.

Figure 1. Box-and-Whisker Plots of 1-year Retention Rates for California Public Colleges ($n = 145$ colleges)

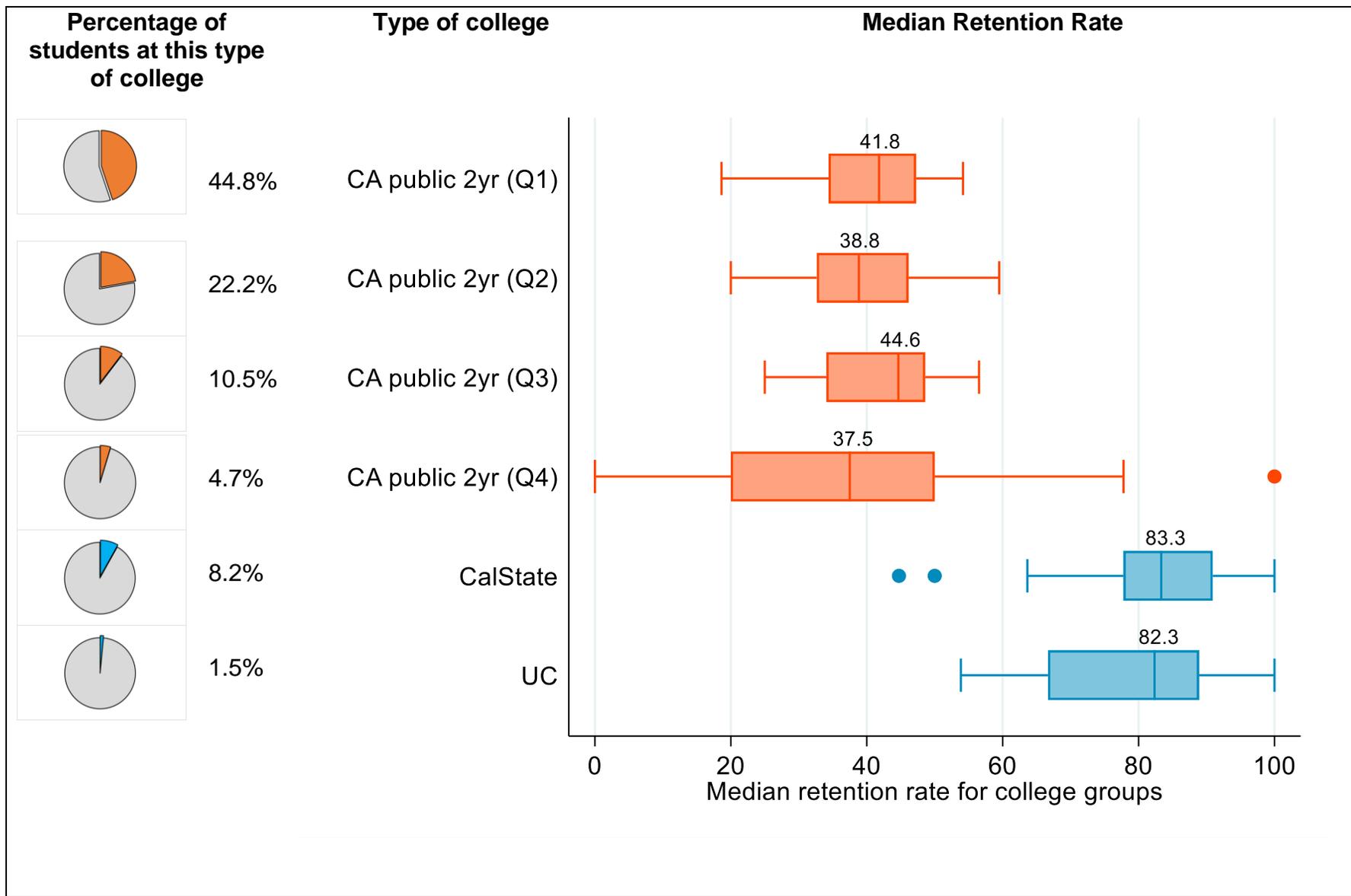


Table 2 examines the colleges that youth subsequently attended after their first college, up to their 21st birthday. The first three columns in Table 2 replicate the first three columns in Table 1, displaying information about the type of college where students first enrolled. The columns on the right of the table provide information about the college(s) youth attended after their first college. Overall, about 76% of youth only attended one college. About 20% of all youth subsequently attended at least one 2-year college, 3% subsequently attended at least one 4-year college, and about 1% subsequently attended both a 2-year and a 4-year college. For students who first enrolled in California public 2- and 4-year colleges, their subsequent colleges were overwhelmingly 2-year colleges. This was also the case for students who first enrolled in California private colleges.⁶

Table 2. Subsequent Colleges Youth Attended after Their First College (*n* = 7,997 students)

	No. of schools	No. of students enrolled	Additional colleges attended after the first college			
			Only attended one college	Subsequently attended 2yr college(s)	Subsequently attended 4yr college(s)	Subsequently attended both 2yr and 4yr colleges
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	%	%	%
Total	515	7,997	76.3	19.6	3.0	1.1
California public 2-year colleges						
Top quartile (most attended)	28	3,579	80.5	16.5	2.4	0.6
Middle top quartile	28	1,773	76.7	19.2	2.8	1.3
Middle bottom quartile	28	838	72.3	23.7	3.2	0.8

⁶ The one exception to this trend was for students who first enrolled in out-of-state 2-year colleges. Similar to the other groups, most of those students never attended another college (73.7%), but for those who did, a greater percentage enrolled in a 4-year school than a 2-year school. This finding should be regarded with caution due to the small number of youth on which these estimates are based.

Table 2, cont'd

Bottom quartile (least attended)	29	376	73.4	23.7	1.1	1.9
California public 4-year Colleges						
CalState	23	652	63.2	31.8	3.1	2.0
UC	9	119	73.1	25.2	1.7	0.0
California Private Colleges						
2-year	25	69	78.3	21.7	0.0	0.0
4-year	47	98	61.2	28.6	4.1	6.1
Out-of-State Colleges						
2-year	130	193	73.7	11.6	14.2	0.5
4-year	168	300	74.0	17.0	7.0	2.0

Study Limitations

Several limitations of the analyses are worth noting when interpreting the findings. First, the sample for this memo zeroed in on a specific subgroup of youth in California foster care, namely young people who were in child-welfare-supervised foster care and who were in care on their 18th birthday. Findings may not generalize to youth outside of these criteria (for example, probation-supervised foster youth, youth who did not participate in extended foster care). The findings were also based on data in the years 2012 to 2019. This was a time when several important changes were underway in California, such as the addition of state funds to supplement federal funding for education and training vouchers and the expansion of campus-based support programs in 2-year public colleges. These and other external factors may have influenced the rates of enrollment and retention, which may also still be moving targets due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, this study only considered enrollment and the number of completed semesters up to age 21. If we had looked at outcomes to a later age (for example, age 24), the sample size would have been greatly reduced and would have excluded the youth who most recently turned 18. This would have dated the findings and reduced the number of youth available to calculate college averages (such as the average retention rate). Future studies that can track youth to later ages are warranted. These analyses would capture youth who attended additional colleges after age 21 (such as transfers from 2-

year colleges to 4-year colleges), capture youth who had a later start in college, and provide estimates of long-term outcomes such as degree completion.

Third, there are notable limitations of the NSC data. About 12% of the original population of foster youth appeared in NSC records, but their college enrollment data were not released because their record was blocked. Some exploratory analyses found that most of the blocked records (about 97%) belonged to students in public 2-year colleges. Had these blocked records been available, the composition of schools in the four quartiles of the California public 2-year schools would have likely changed. In addition, the retention rates and the number of completed semesters may have also differed. Further, while NSC data provides records of whether students completed a given term, they do not provide information on specific courses that students enrolled in (for instance, whether they were prerequisite versus credit-bearing), the number of credits attempted and completed, and GPA. Course completion, credit accumulation, and GPA are important measures of students' progress through college.

Discussion

This memo provided an important look at the types of colleges that California foster youth first enroll in. Similar to previous CalYOUTH memos (Okpych et al., 2019; Okpych et al., 2021), we found that California public 2-year colleges were the most common entryway into higher education. About 8 in 10 youth (82%) first attended one of these schools. Indeed, there were 28 2-year public colleges where nearly half (45%) of all youth wound up attending. These colleges tended to be located in or around major metropolitan areas (for example, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, Fresno, Long Beach), although a few were located in more remote areas with town populations of less than 50,000 people. According to the California College Pathways (2021), at the time of this writing, 26 of the 28 public 2-year colleges in the top quartile had a support program specific to foster youth. This memo underscores why it is important for child welfare agencies and other stakeholders invested in improving college outcomes for foster youth to identify these high-traffic colleges and build robust supports there. This will involve improvements in cross-system data sharing to identify youth with foster care histories on campus, to link these students with available services, and to track their academic progress. These findings can also be used to make a case for greater investments in services that support youth with care backgrounds, such as campus-support programs (CSPs), at these high-traffic colleges. Prior CalYOUTH findings suggest that a nontrivial percentage of youth attend colleges with a CSP but do not participate (Okpych et al., 2020), and inadequate funding and staffing are the top constraints of CSPs (Geiger et al., 2018).

Our results found some differences between types of colleges in the demographic makeup of the foster youth student body. Schools in the CalState and UC systems tended to have larger percentages of females than found in all college types. Black students appeared to be underrepresented in the bottom two quartiles of California public 2-year colleges and in UC schools. One potential explanation for the

underrepresentation of Black students in some 2-year colleges is that several of these schools are located in more rural and remote areas of the state, with lower concentrations of African American families. Indeed, when we looked at demographic characteristics of all students in California 2-year public colleges, the percentage of Black students in 21 of 29 colleges in the bottom quartile was lower than the percentage of Black students in public 2-year colleges statewide (California Community Colleges, 2021a). Although the percentage of Black students in CalState campuses (27.5%) was the same as the overall percentage of Black students in the sample (27.5%), they were underrepresented at UC campuses (16.1%). Inequalities in access to high-quality secondary schooling (in areas such as college-going culture, availability of AP courses, college advising) and racial biases may contribute to the disparities we found in this study. Similar to general enrollment trends (Xie, 2020), schools in the CalState and UC systems had larger proportions of Asian and Pacific Islander youth relative to the overall student body of all colleges in this sample.

This study found that the majority of youth with foster care backgrounds did not complete their first two semesters at the first college they enrolled in. The average persistence rate for the nearly 8,000 students in our sample was 44.4%, and these students completed an average of 2.21 semesters. This rate is comparable to the persistence rates reported in other studies of foster youth (see Okpych et al., 2020). These findings underscore that the first marking period is a critical intervention point. Another study that was able to follow foster youths' college careers to age 29/30 found that the largest percentage of foster youth who had enrolled in college fell in the "toe-in-water" group (49% of all enrollees), which included students who enrolled in college for one or two terms and never returned (Okpych, 2021). Thus, interventions need to be intentional, robust, and start early—if not before—a student's first semester. This is especially true in 2-year colleges, where many foster youth are required to take remedial coursework and are more likely to be underprepared for the rigor and independence of college-level work (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2015; Okpych, 2021).

Another important finding is that students who first enrolled in public 4-year colleges fared much better in terms of retention and number of completed semesters than did students who enrolled in public 2-year colleges, which is consistent with other studies of foster youth (see, for example, Day et al., 2021; Okpych, 2021). It goes without saying that there are likely differences in the characteristics of students who enroll in competitive public 4-year colleges and 2-year open-admission colleges, but studies have found that after key student characteristics are accounted for, foster youth are still more likely to persist and graduate if they first enrolled in a 4-year college (Okpych, 2021; Okpych et al., 2021). As discussed in the introduction, a nontrivial percentage of foster youth may be undermatched, meaning they attended a college that is below their potential. For some youth with foster care backgrounds, 2-year colleges are a good onramp to higher education that fits their current academic preparation and interests, as well as other life factors (for example, geographic constraints, other responsibilities). But other youth may benefit from enrolling in a 4-year institution from the start and may have a greater likelihood of remaining enrolled and ultimately graduating. Generally, 4-year institutions offer more resources to support students to degree completion and greater percentages of students who enroll

full-time and live on campus, potentially contributing to a robust campus culture focused on academic success (Ovink et al., 2018).

Generally, only a small percentage of youth in this sample attended in-state private colleges (about 2%). We found that students who attended private colleges in California were less likely to be retained and completed fewer semesters than did students attending in-state public schools. In addition to lower retention rates, private colleges' high cost of attendance should also be a serious point of consideration when providing college advice to foster youth. It is important to protect youth with care histories from unwittingly taking on large amounts of student loan debt that becomes unmanageable after they leave college.

About three in four youth in the sample only enrolled in only one college before their 21 birthday. Among the other youth who attended an additional institution(s), most enrolled in a 2-year college, regardless of the type of college they started. From the data we have up to age 21, we do not see evidence that a large percentage of youth are using 2-year college as a steppingstone to 4-year college. Among foster youth who started in a California 2-year public college ($n = 6,569$), 3.4% later attended a 4-year institution. When considering just those youth who had first enrolled at least two years before the NSC data were drawn ($n = 4,499$), 4.6% later attended a 4-year college.⁷ This latter percentage is similar to the transfer rate of all first-time students in California 2-year public colleges. A 2020 report by the Public Policy Institute of California found that about 4% of students who enrolled in California public 2-year colleges, and whose goal was to complete a degree or transfer to a bachelor's degree-granting institution, transferred to a 4-year college within 2 years (Johnson & Cuellar Mejia, 2020).⁸ Although the report found that the transfer rate increased when students were tracked for a longer time (for example, 19% transferred within 4 years), the overall transfer rates were nevertheless underwhelming (Smith, 2021b). California has made a longstanding investment in 2-year public colleges as a gateway to CalState and UC schools. Programs that streamline the process for transferring a 2-year

⁷ If we focus specifically on youth who started in a 2-year public college ($n = 6,569$), 1.8% transferred to a CSU or UC. If we limit this to students who enrolled at least 2 years before the NSC data were drawn ($n = 4,499$), the percentage of youth who attended a CSU or UC increases only slightly, to 2.5%.

⁸ There are some important points that should be kept in mind when comparing the rates found in the current memo and the 2020 report by the Public Policy Institute of California. First, there are differences between the groups of students. While both consider first-time students, this memo focused on young people who first enrolled before the age of 21, while the 2020 report did not have an age restriction. Second, the 2020 report included just students who declared earning an Associate degree or transferring as their goal, which the report notes is the case for more than three-quarters of first-time students (Johnson & Cuellar Mejia, 2020, p.8). In contrast, NSC data do not contain information on student goals, and our sample likely includes students with goals other than transferring or completing a degree (for example, earn a certificate without transferring, explore career interests). Third, it is not possible in our data to tell whether a youth officially transferred to a 4-year college. Thus, our data may be picking up on some youth who attended a 4-year college but who did not officially transfer.

degree to CSUs and UCs are important steps in the right direction,⁹ and additional reforms have been proposed that would strengthen student advising and ease some of the administrative hurdles faced by students looking to transfer (Smith, 2021a). These reforms would likely benefit underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students, including young people with foster care backgrounds.

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⁹ The California Community Colleges-Associate Degree Transfer Program provides guaranteed priority admission to a CSU for students who complete an Associate degree in specified majors at a California 2-year public college and who meet CSU admission eligibility criteria (California Community Colleges, 2021b). Other institutions, including some HBCUs and nonprofit 4-year colleges, also participate in the program. The Transfer Admissions Guarantee provides qualifying California 2-year public college students with a guaranteed spot at six of the UCs (University of California Admissions, 2021).

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