

Fostering Success at SUNY

*Financial Support through
the Foster Youth College
Success Initiative*

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Fostering Success at SUNY

Starting in 2015, New York State began offering college financial assistance to individuals who have experienced foster care at any point after the age of 13. Recognizing the unique needs of this student population and the desire to provide additional support, the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) was created to encourage and ease the financial burden of college-going for foster care youth, providing awards that can be used to cover costs, including tuition and fees, room and board (as well as housing during school recess), books and supplies, transportation to and from campus, academic support services such as advising and tutoring not already covered by the campus, and certain qualifying personal expenses.

Demand for FYCSI support continues to grow as more and more students apply for and receive these awards, and early results point to the program's potential positive impacts: FYCSI recipients tend to reenroll after their first year at higher rates than their peers and post higher graduation rates for associate degrees and, after six years, bachelor's degrees.

Why Focus on Older Foster Care Youth?

Youth placed in foster care often have suffered family trauma that typically causes lasting social and emotional effects. In New York, for example, nine out of every 10 children in foster care were removed from their homes because of neglect or abandonment (58 percent), parental drug or alcohol abuse (26 percent), or physical abuse (7 percent).¹ These experiences, plus the disruption of foster care placement itself, cannot only manifest in educational difficulties during a child's elementary, middle, and high school years, they also make the transition to independent living—which often occurs during one's college years—particularly challenging.

While the public may tend to think of children in need of foster placement as younger aged, in New York, more than one-fourth—28 percent—are 13 years old or older when

placed in foster care. And for many, foster care is not a short-term intervention: more than one-fourth (27 percent) of placed children have been in foster care for three years or more.² Older and longer-term fostered children may experience greater levels of disruption to their lives when the structure of a foster care family is no longer available to them.

Most teenage youth have the support of a parent or parents and other family members to help them along while making the transition to adulthood. Many children in foster homes, however, are forced to face a more abrupt transition to adulthood on their own when they “age out” of the care system. In New York, approximately 7,000 youth exit foster care each year, and nearly one-fourth (22 percent) of them do so only because they turn 18 years old and become emancipated.³

Starting in 1986, the federal government recognized the need to assist foster care youth in making the transition out of sponsored care when it amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Independent Living Program. Made permanent in 1999 and doubling the funding to \$140 million annually,⁴ the program provides states with funding specifically intended to support foster youth with a variety of services for them to live on their own. In the years since, federal funding for these and related programs has been substantially increased, age eligibility has been expanded, and states have been allowed to use funding for a much broader array of support services.⁵

Even with these added efforts and investments, however, when it comes to education, the life outcomes for youth who have experienced foster care still reflect a vulnerable population. One prominent and comprehensive study of foster care youth in the Midwest found the following troubling outcomes:

- By their mid-twenties, one-fifth (19.9 percent) of foster care youth did not have a high school diploma or a GED, making them twice as likely as their general population peers to lack this basic educational credential.⁶
- Although 40 percent had completed at least one year of college, only 8 percent of these youth had earned a degree from a two-year or four-year college, a rate almost six times lower than their peers.⁷
- Nearly one-third of students who experienced foster care reported needing to enroll in remedial education courses when they entered college.⁸
- Of youth with foster care experience who enrolled in a vocational or technical school, a two-year college, a four-year college, or graduate school, more than one-third (35.4 percent) reported that they dropped out. By far, the most prominent reason cited for dropping out—and as their barrier to returning to school—was that they couldn’t afford the tuition and/or they needed to work.⁹
- By age 26, only 11 percent of young women and 5 percent of young men who had exited foster care had graduated from a two-year or a four-year school.¹⁰

The economic repercussions from inadequate educational outcomes and support systems are not surprising: a study by the National Foster Youth Initiative found that “only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.”¹¹

The Foster Youth College Success Initiative

In 2015, New York State initiated the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI), a financial assistance program designed to help youth with a history in foster care successfully attend and complete college. The initial appropriation for the program totaled \$1.5 million,¹² doubling to \$3 million for the 2016–17 school year and doubling again the following year.¹³ For 2022–23, Governor Hochul proposed a record-high \$7.9 million appropriation,¹⁴ and the state legislature enacted even more—just under \$8.2 million¹⁵—bringing the total state investment in FYCSI to approximately \$42.4 million over eight years. Since its inception, the program has served more than 2,000 individual students.¹⁶

Recent testimony to the New York State Legislature by Deidra Nesbeth, director of the Fostering Youth Success Alliance—a driving force behind the creation of New York’s FYCSI program—offered personal anecdotes that underscore the importance of FYCSI financial support. A former foster care teen and 2021 graduate from SUNY Fredonia, when speaking about how she could afford college, said, “FYCSI was the only reason I could go at all.” Another student stated, “FYCSI allowed me to pay my rent so I wouldn’t have to drop out. I can now say that I am in my graduating semester at SUNY Schenectady.”¹⁷

Eligibility

To be eligible for FYCSI college financial assistance, a student:

- must be a resident of New York and be enrolled in a SUNY college or university, CUNY college or university, or an independent or private college or university that hosts a Higher Education Opportunities Program; and,
- must meet the definition of a foster youth or orphan as stated in the federal Higher Education Act:
 - For foster youth:
 - A student who is currently in foster care or was in foster care at some point after their 13th birthday. This includes:
 - students adopted from foster care after their 13th birthday;
 - students living with a relative or kin under a kinship foster care agreement;
 - students who have aged out of foster care; and,
 - students who were in foster care in another state, but meet the opportunity program residency requirements of being a New York resident for at least one year or received a high school diploma from a high school in New York.
 - For orphans:
 - A student whose parents (both) are deceased after their 13th birthday, and then subsequently, goes into a legal guardianship agreement.

Eligible students attending college who have experienced foster care may apply for FYCSI assistance at any point during their enrollment and may apply for awards as general financial assistance or for particular expenses, such as books or housing, to meet a demonstrated need.

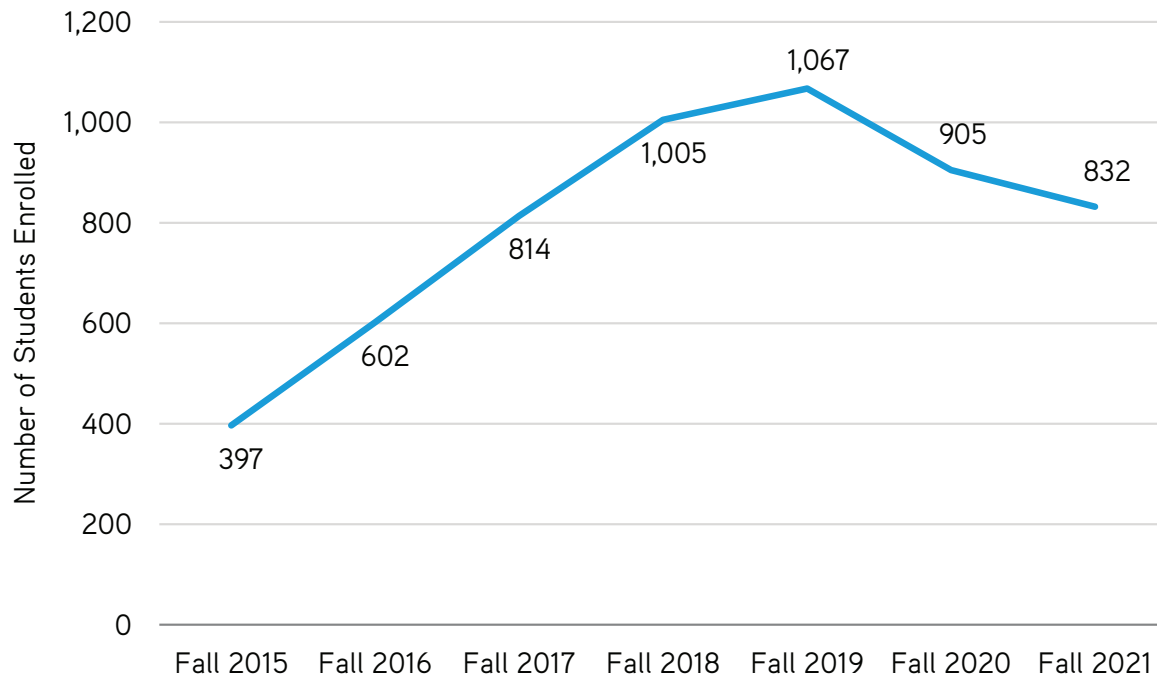
FYCSI Program Outcomes at SUNY

An examination of the use and outcomes of FYCSI could provide useful insights about this program. In this study, we look at FYCSI aid recipients since the initiation of the award program in fall 2015 who are attending any of the campuses that make up the State University of New York System (SUNY) and use data from the SUNY Data Warehouse provided by SUNY System Administration Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics.¹⁸

Number of SUNY Students Served

Since fall 2015, SUNY has identified a total of 2,216 enrolled students who experienced foster care, ranging from 397 students enrolled in fall 2015 to a peak of 1,067 students in the pre-COVID-19 fall 2019 semester to 832 in the fall 2021 term (see [Figure 1](#)). Of these, 819 (37.0 percent) have been reported to have received an FYCSI award for any given term they were enrolled at SUNY.

FIGURE 1. Students Experiencing Foster Care Enrolled at SUNY, Fall 2015 through Fall 2021



The number of students from foster care receiving FYCSI awards at the start of each academic year has grown steadily since the program's inception, from just nine students in fall 2015 to 347 in fall 2021 (the most recent complete data available). The percentage of foster care students receiving aid awards increased, too, during the same time period, from 2.9 percent to 44.7 percent (see Figures 2A and 2B).¹⁹

FIGURE 2A. FYCSI Awardees at SUNY: Enrolled Foster Care Students Receiving Awards in a Given Term, Fall 2015 through Fall 2021

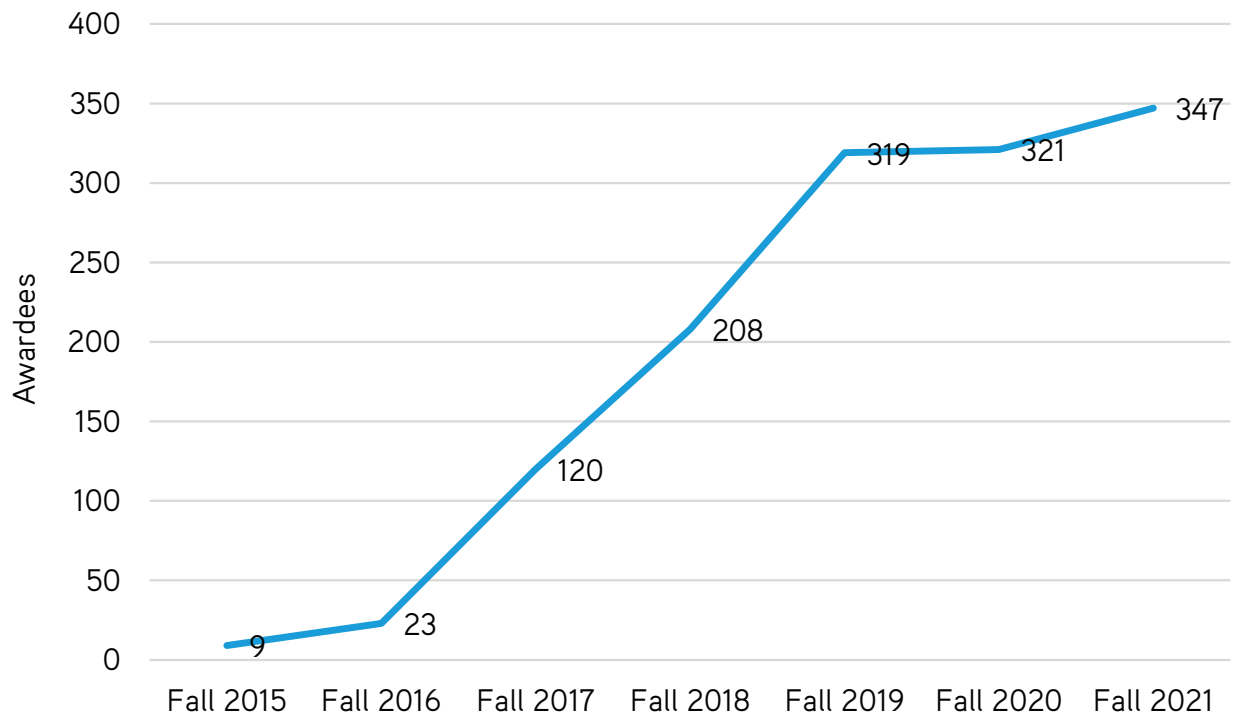
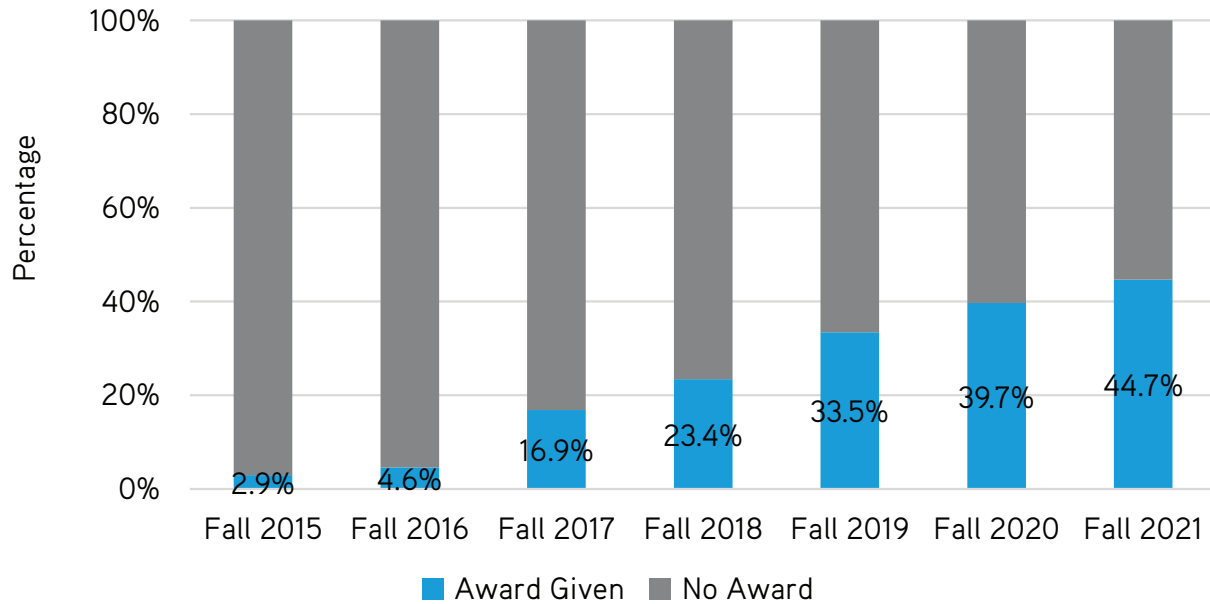


FIGURE 2B. FYCSI Awardees at SUNY: Percent of Enrolled Foster Care Students Receiving Awards in a Given Term, Fall 2015 through Fall 2021



While students may receive an award in any given term, some students may not immediately be aware of the program, others may find their needs change, and thus they may not receive an award each term they are enrolled. It is, therefore, important to look at the number of enrolled SUNY students in a given term who have *ever* received FYCSI aid since the program began. This number climbed steadily and dramatically each year of the program, increasing by more than four times in the four years from fall 2015 to fall 2019. When total enrollment across the SUNY system fell in fall 2020 and fall 2021 as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, as could be expected, so too did the enrollment of students receiving FYCSI assistance, which dropped to 2018 levels (see [Figure 3A](#)). As a proportion of total SUNY enrollment, foster care students grew during the program’s growth years, and then practically held steady throughout the pandemic-affected years (see [Figure 3B](#)).

FIGURE 3A. FYCSI Awardees at SUNY: Students Receiving FYCSI Awards in Any Term, Fall 2015 through Fall 2021

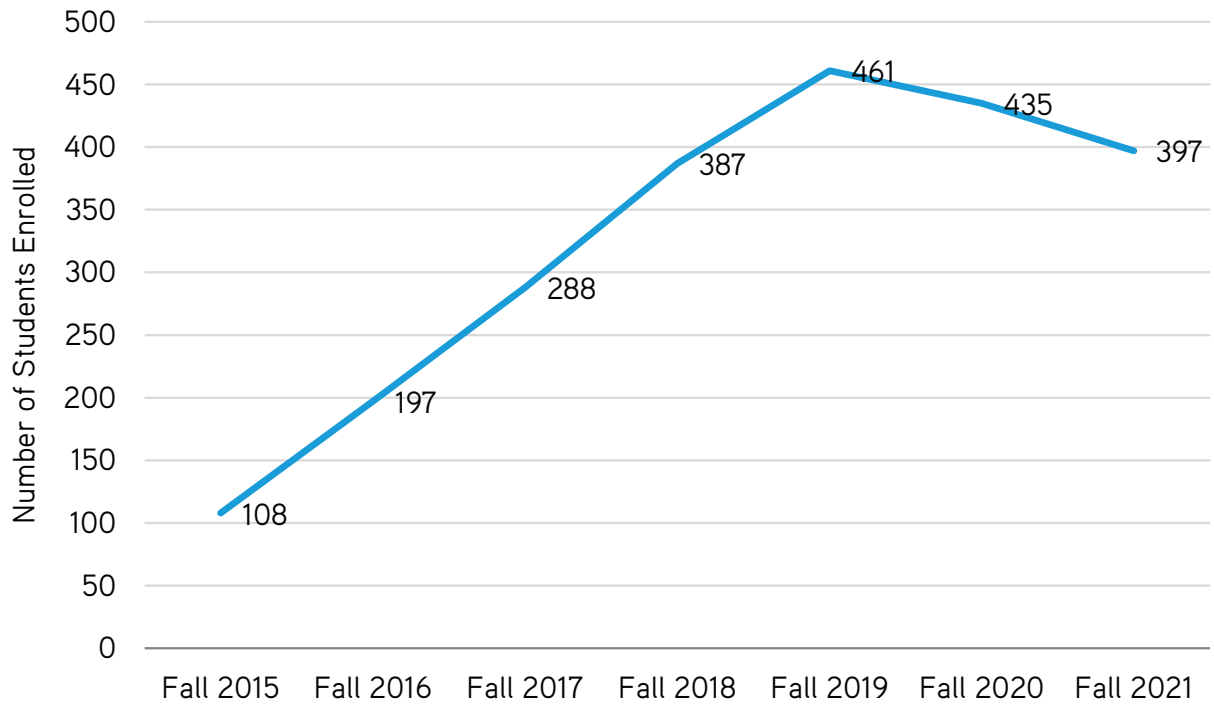
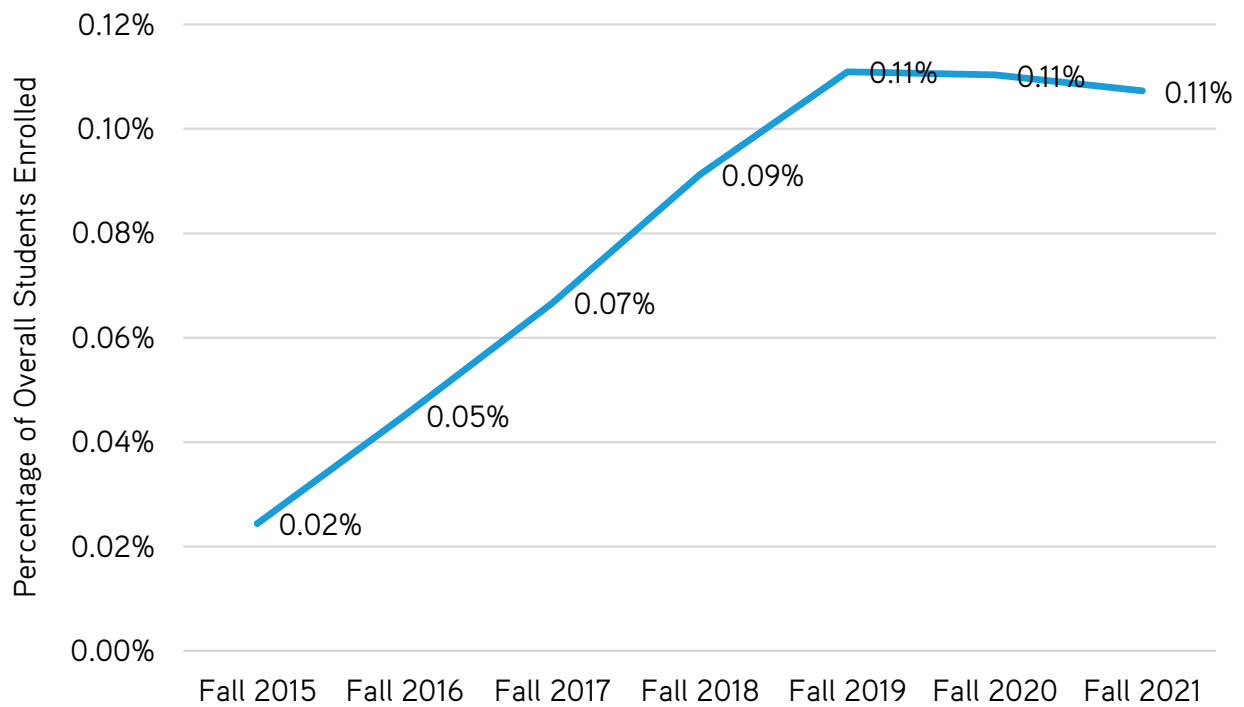


FIGURE 3B. FYCSI Awardees as a Percent of Total SUNY Enrollment: Students Receiving FYCSI Awards in Any Term, Fall 2015 through Fall 2021



Size and Frequency of FYCSI Awards

For the fall 2021 term, the average amount of FYCSI aid per student was \$4,254, with awards ranging from \$125 to \$9,000. Among the 347 students receiving awards, on average FYCSI awards made up just over one-fourth (26.5 percent) of the total aid received by these students; only 4 percent of students had more than half of their total aid coming from foster care scholarships (see Figures 4A and 4B). Another large source of aid for these students is the Pell Grant, which is awarded to eligible low-income students. In this cohort, 91.6 percent (318 students) received a Pell Grant in addition to their foster care scholarship, suggesting that nearly all foster care students at SUNY are low-income themselves, if independent, or come from lower-income guardianship families.

FIGURE 4A. Foster Care Award as a Percentage of Total Financial Aid, Fall 2021

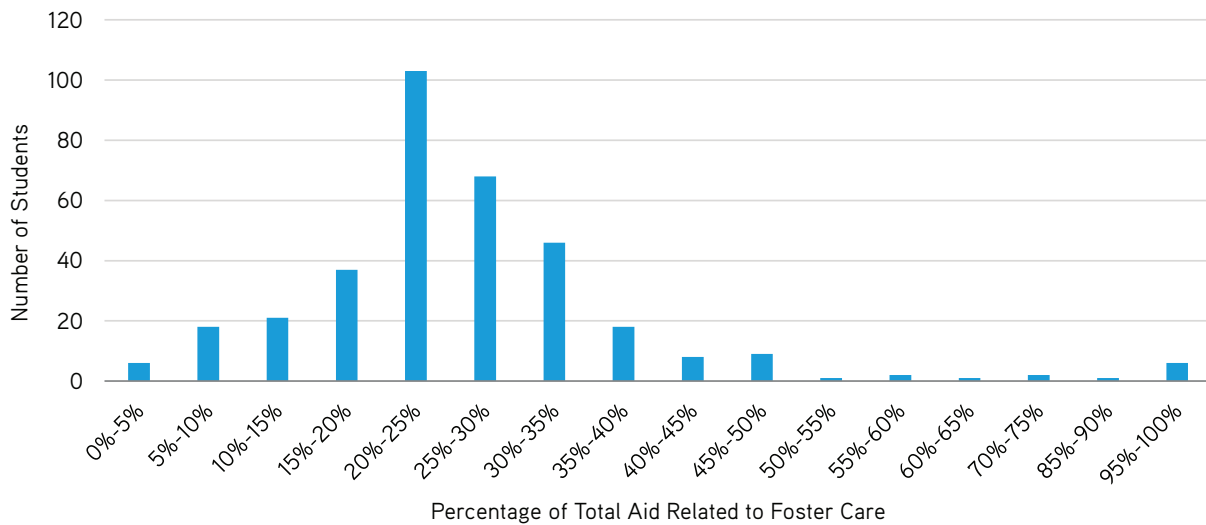
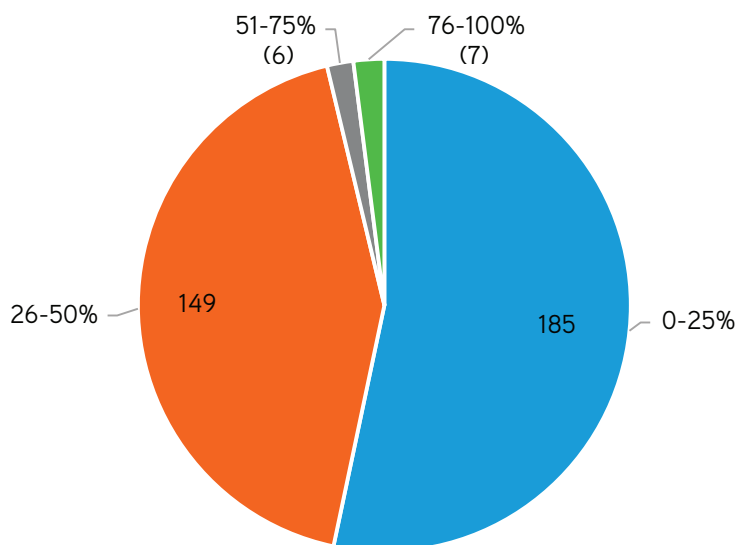


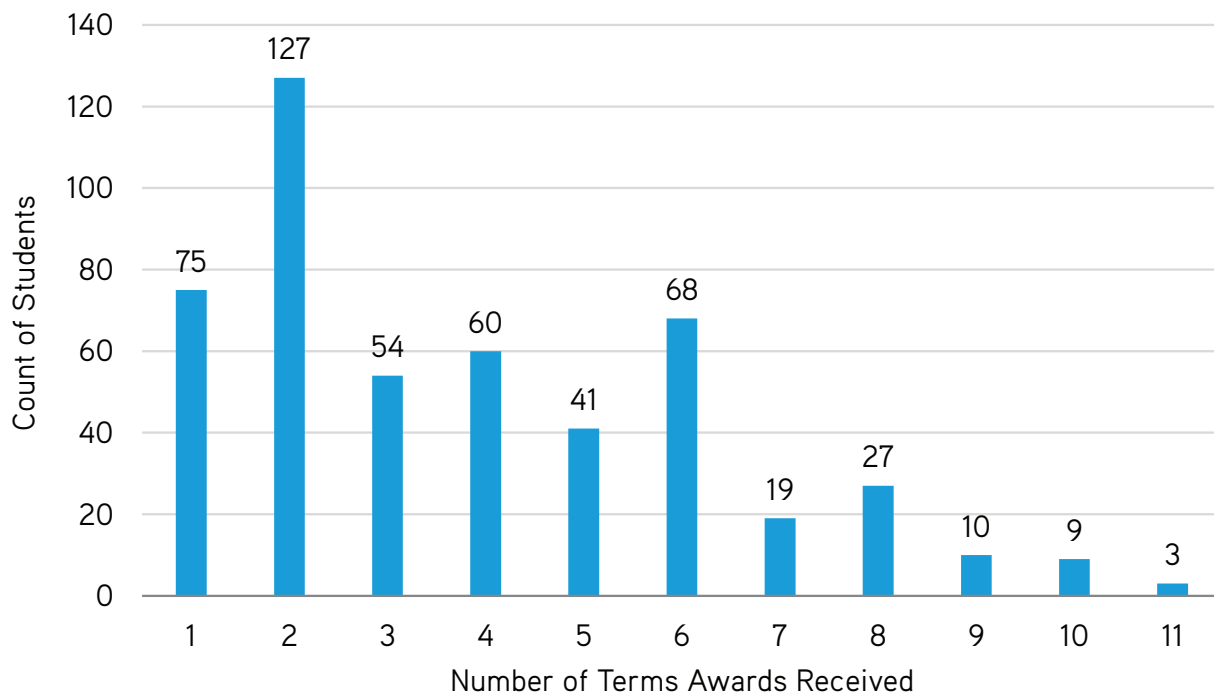
FIGURE 4B. Percent of Total Financial Aid Package Comprised by FYCSI Award, Fall 2021



For more than half of all students (185 students; 53 percent) who received an award in fall 2021, the FYCSI aid made up no more than 25 percent of their total financial aid package. For 149 students (43 percent), the FYCSI award represents 26 to 50 percent of their total financial aid package.

As mentioned above, students with a history of experience with the foster care system can receive FYCSI awards for any term they are enrolled at a SUNY school. Additionally, one-time grants have been made to students to cover specific financial costs in a given semester. To avoid any anomaly impacts on requesting and receiving FYCSI caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, when many campuses instituted remote learning options, we examined the 418 unique students who received at least one FYCSI award from 2015 through 2019. [Figure 5](#), below, shows that nearly half (48.3 percent) claimed an FYCSI award for one or two terms in college, but not again. Another 27.3 percent claimed awards for three or four terms. The overall infrequency of FYCSI awards is curious and worthy of additional data collection and study. It could, for example, reveal a challenge for students who have experienced foster care in remaining steadily enrolled at SUNY, limited knowledge of or access to the aid program, changing financial needs during their college years, or other issues.

FIGURE 5. Number of Terms FYCSI Awards Are Claimed by SUNY Students, 2015–19



Demographics

For fall 2021, SUNY identified 397 enrolled students who received a foster care scholarship at some point in their higher education journey. Compared to the overall SUNY student population, this group of students was more likely to identify as female and less likely to identify as white (see [Table 1](#)). While two-thirds (66.8 percent) of the FYCSI cohort identifies as Black, Hispanic, or multiracial, slightly more than one-fourth (27.7 percent) of the overall SUNY student population does so.

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of FYCSI Awardees, Fall 2021

Characteristic	Foster Care N = 397	Total SUNY N = 370,114
Sex		
Female	264 (66.5%)	207,178 (56.0%)
Male	133 (33.5%)	162,936 (44.0%)
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American	147 (37.0%)	37,976 (10.3%)
White	97 (24.4%)	197,746 (53.4%)
Hispanic/Latino	90 (22.7%)	53,704 (14.5%)
Multiracial	28 (7.1%)	10,692 (2.9%)
AAPI	21 (5.3%)	30,807 (8.3%)
Unknown/Other	14 (3.5%)	39,189 (10.6%)

There has been little change in the racial composition of FYCSI award recipients over the first seven years of the program ([Figure 6A](#)), even while the proportion of students of color has increased at SUNY overall ([Figure 6B](#)).

FIGURE 6A. Race/Ethnicity of FYCSI Awardees at SUNY

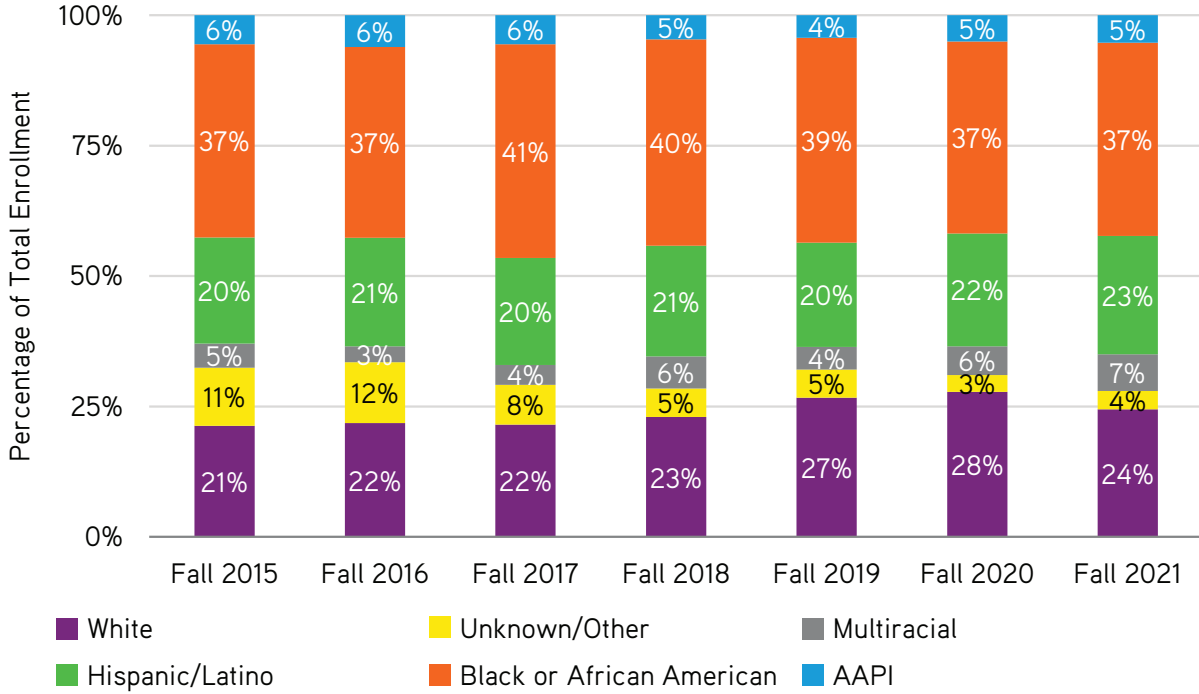
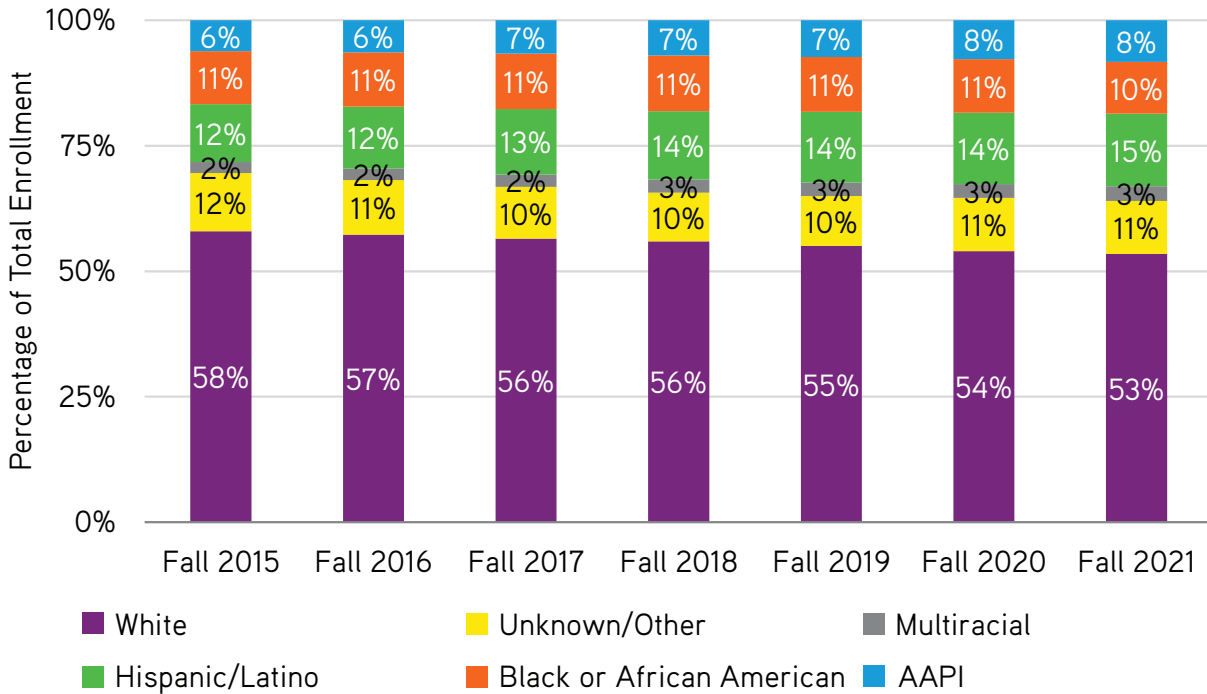


FIGURE 6B. Race/Ethnicity of SUNY Students



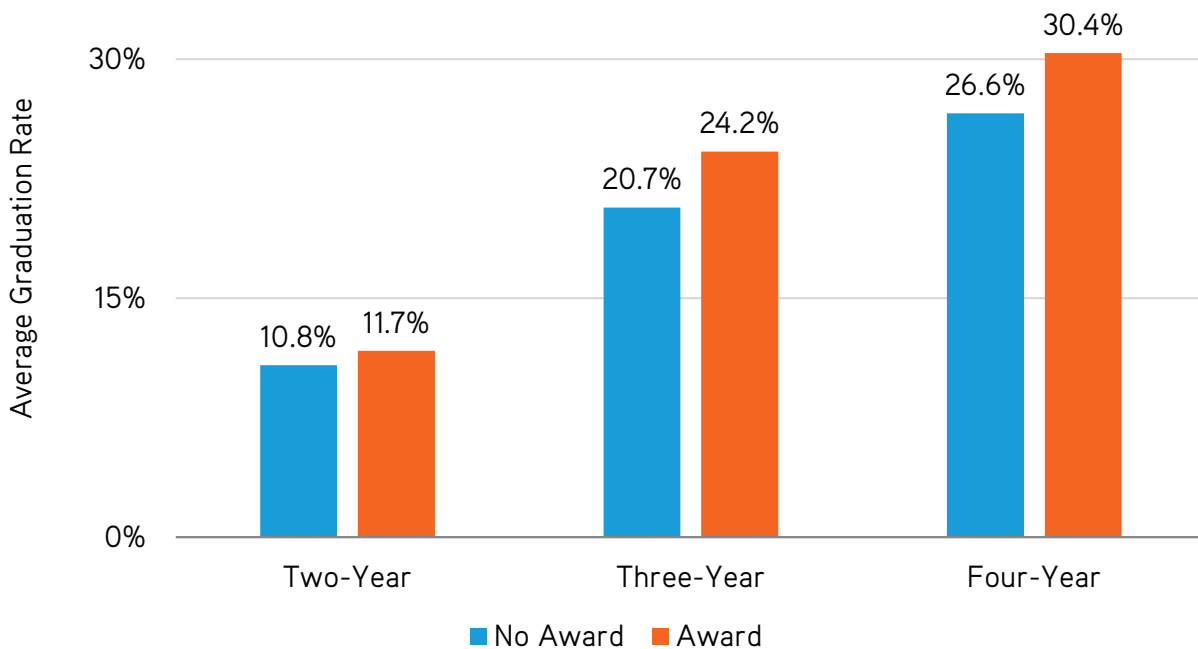
Academics

It is useful to examine how FYCSI award recipients performed academically, including in comparison to SUNY undergraduates overall, to Pell Grant recipients, and to underrepresented minority (URM) students as a whole.

Graduation Rates: Associate Degrees

Students with foster care experience who receive an FYCSI award consistently post higher two-year, three-year, and four-year associate degree graduation rates than their foster care peers who do not receive an award (see [Figure 7](#)). While an interesting outcome and one worthy of further study (ideally with a control group), we cannot assume that the scholarship causes these students to be more likely to graduate; it could also be, for example, that the same students who are more able to track down and get any scholarship for which they are qualified are also more likely to graduate.

FIGURE 7. Two-Year, Three-Year, and Four-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Associate Degree: FYCSI Awardees vs. Non-Awardees, Fall 2015 to Fall 2019 Cohorts



It is interesting to note, too, how graduation rates for FYCSI award recipients compare to SUNY students overall, to lower-income Pell Grant recipient students, and to underrepresented minority students as a group. Associate degree graduation rates vary significantly for FYCSI award recipients for the first five cohorts (fall 2015 through fall 2019), with two-year graduation rates ranging from 10.2 percent to 15.3 percent, three-year graduation rates ranging from 19.4 percent to 34.5 percent, and four-year graduation rates ranging from 24.7 percent for the most-recent cohort to 58.6 percent for the very first FYCSI cohort (see [Figures 8A, 8B, and 8C](#)).

Earlier cohorts of FYCSI awardees tend to post higher two-year, three-year, and four-year associate's degree graduation rates than their URM peers, and higher three-year and four-year graduation rates than their Pell Grant peers. Impressively, the fall 2015 and fall 2017 FYCSI cohorts post higher or nearly equal three-year and four-year graduation rates to SUNY students overall, too.

FIGURE 8A. Two-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Associate Degree: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2015 to Fall 2019 Cohorts

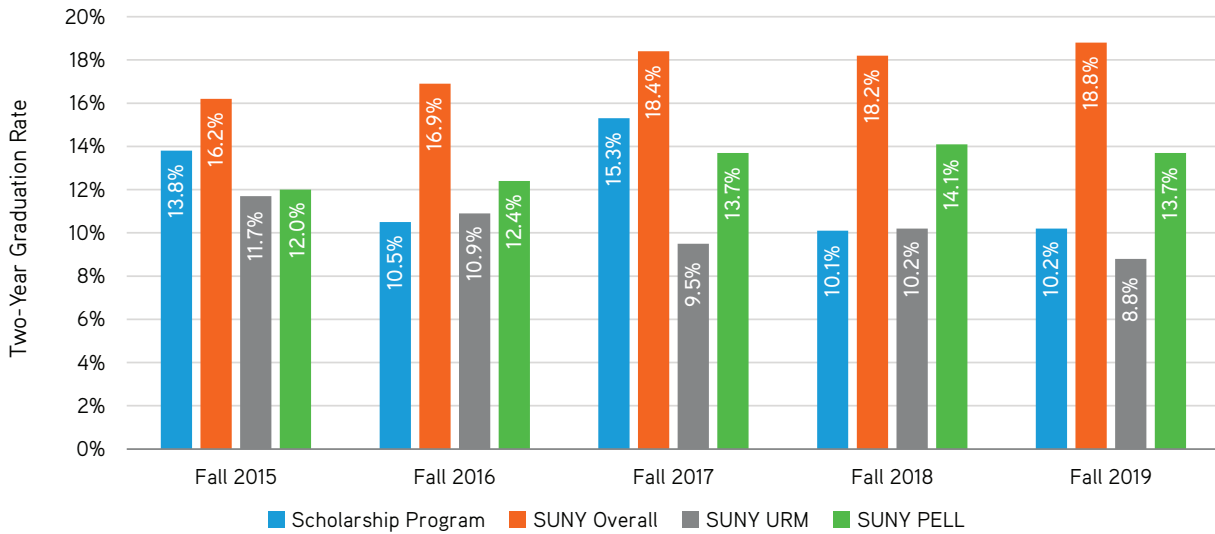


FIGURE 8B. Three-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Associate Degree: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2015 to Fall 2019 Cohorts

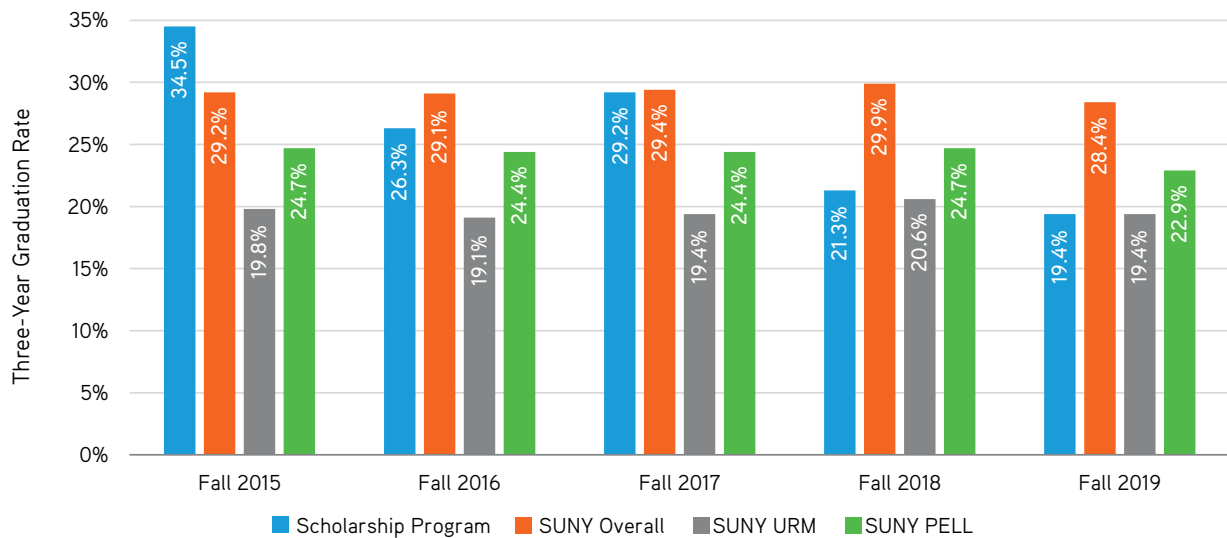
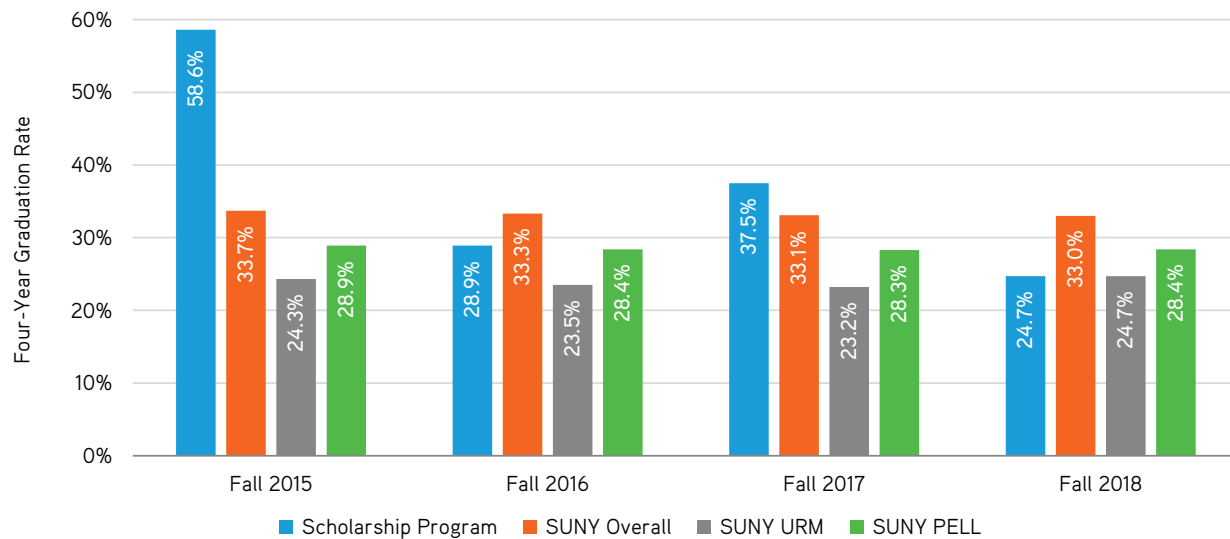


FIGURE 8C. Four-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Associate Degree: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2015 to Fall 2019 Cohorts



Graduation Rates: Bachelor's Degrees

Because the FYCSI program began only in 2015, there are limited cohorts to provide a proper examination for four-year and six-year bachelor's degree graduation rates. Still, an early look at these outcomes is at least initially informative.

As shown in Figures 9A and 9B, with the exception of the first cohort, FYCSI awardees tend to post lower four-year bachelor's degree graduation rates than all comparison groups, but by six years the first FYCSI cohort posts a higher graduation rate than all comparison groups and the second cohort posts higher graduation rates than all but the overall SUNY six-year bachelor's degree graduation rate.

FIGURE 9A. Four-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Bachelor's Degree: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2015 to Fall 2017 Cohorts

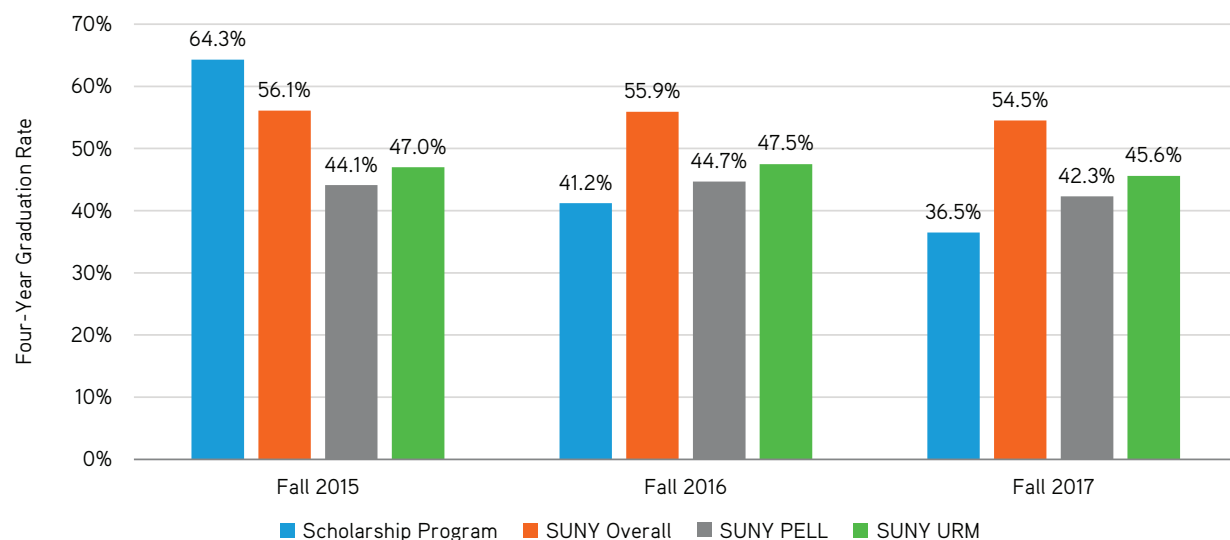
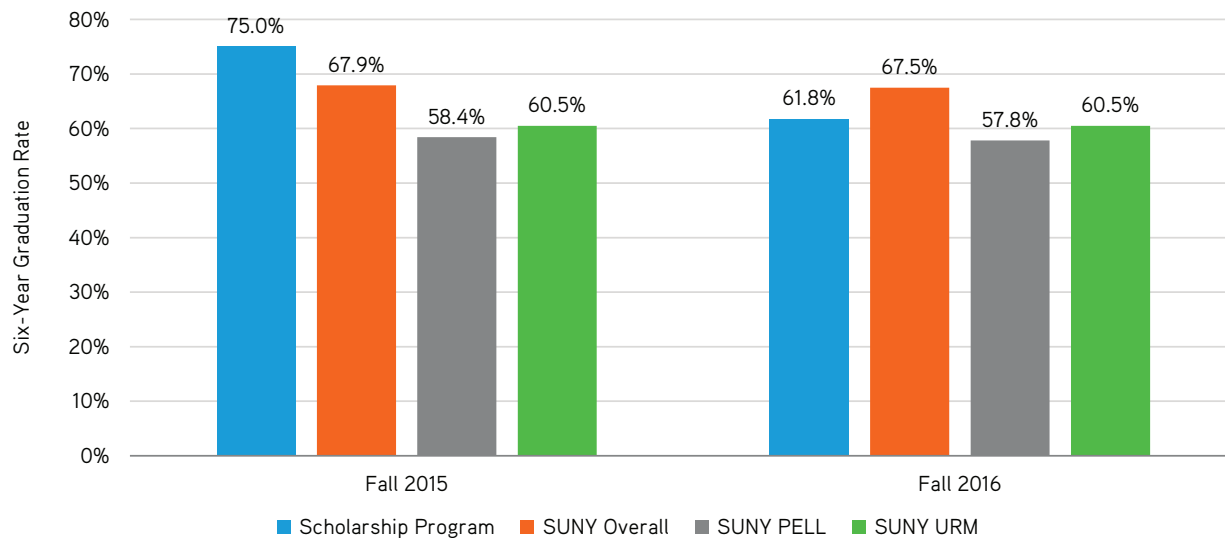
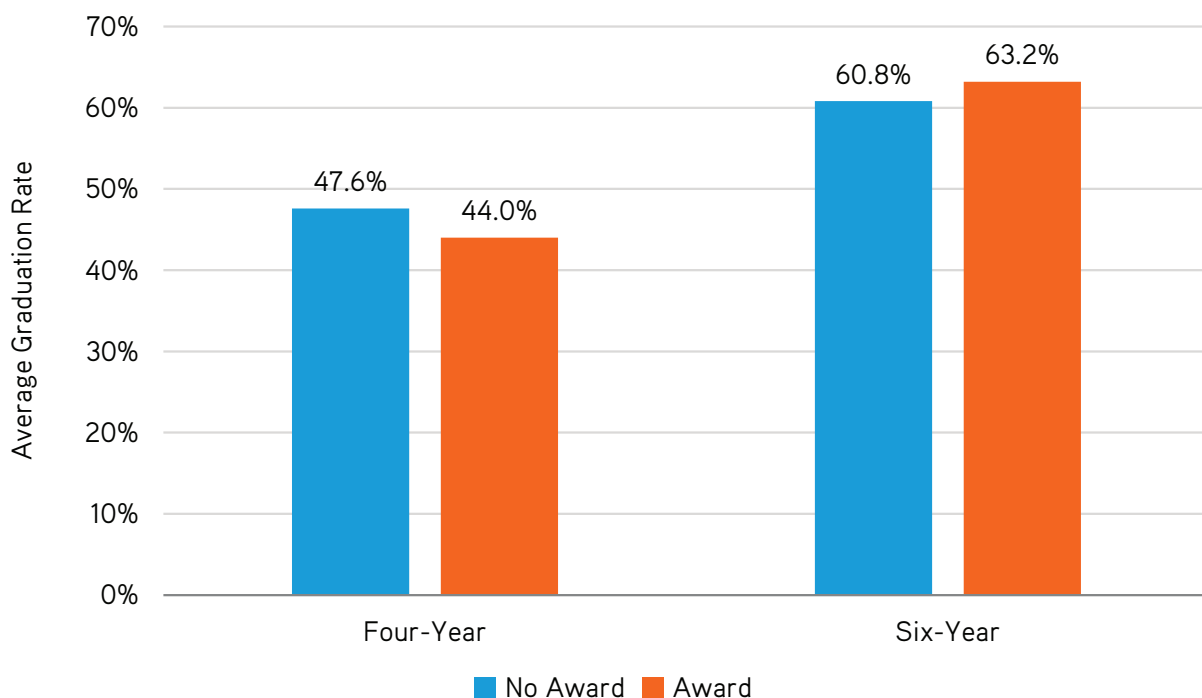


FIGURE 9B. Six-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Bachelor's Degree: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2015 to Fall 2017 Cohorts



Unlike the more dramatic outperformance by FYCSI award recipients compared to their non-awarded foster care peers seen when earning their two-year degrees, the difference between awardees' graduation rates for a bachelor's degree is smaller: SUNY's FYCSI awardees post a slightly higher (63.2 percent versus 60.8 percent) six-year graduation rate, and a slightly lower (44.0 percent versus 47.6 percent) four-year graduation rate (Figure 10).

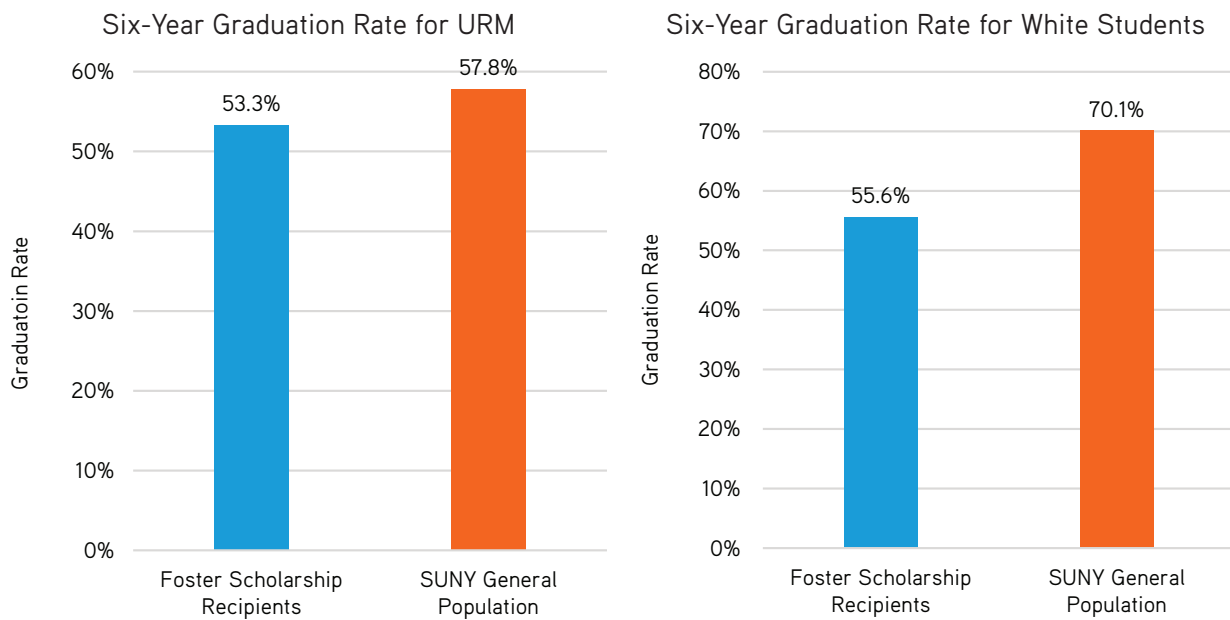
FIGURE 10. Four-Year and Six-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Bachelor's Degree: FYCSI Awardees vs. Non-Awardees, Fall 2015 to Fall 2017 Cohorts



Here, too, it is difficult to show that the receipt of FYCSI aid alone results in better graduation rates. Students who seek out and apply for available aid may be students who are characterized by a stronger motivation to persist to college completion. Improving the program’s outreach and awareness could help lessen any self-selection factors at work in these results.

A deeper dive into the bachelor’s degree graduation rate reveals some interesting outcomes when comparing performance across racial demographic subgroups. For the fall 2016 cohort (the only cohort in our study sample with available comparative demographic data), URM FYCSI awardees post a six-year graduation rate nearly the same as for SUNY URM students overall, while white FYCSI students have a graduation rate nearly 15 percentage points lower than white SUNY students overall ([Figure 11](#)). The relative underperformance by white FYCSI award recipients to their SUNY peers is worthy of further study, ideally including interviews with students to explore possible root causes.

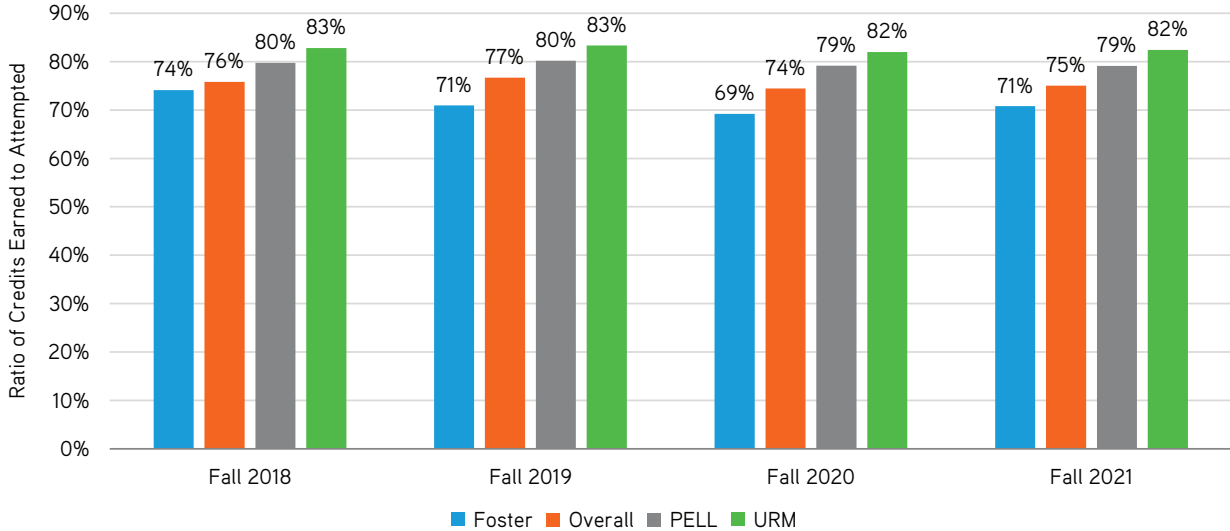
FIGURE 11. Six-Year SUNY Graduation Rate for Bachelor’s Degree: URM FYCSI vs. URM SUNY Total; White FYCSI vs. White SUNY Total, Fall 2016 Cohort



Credits Attempted/Earned

Another measure of academic outcomes is offered by examining the ratio of the number of credits attempted to the number of credits earned, gauging the success of students at completing individual courses. Here, as shown in [Figure 12](#), FYCSI awardees underperform the comparison groups of Pell Grant recipients, URM, and SUNY as a whole for every cohort from fall 2018 to fall 2021.

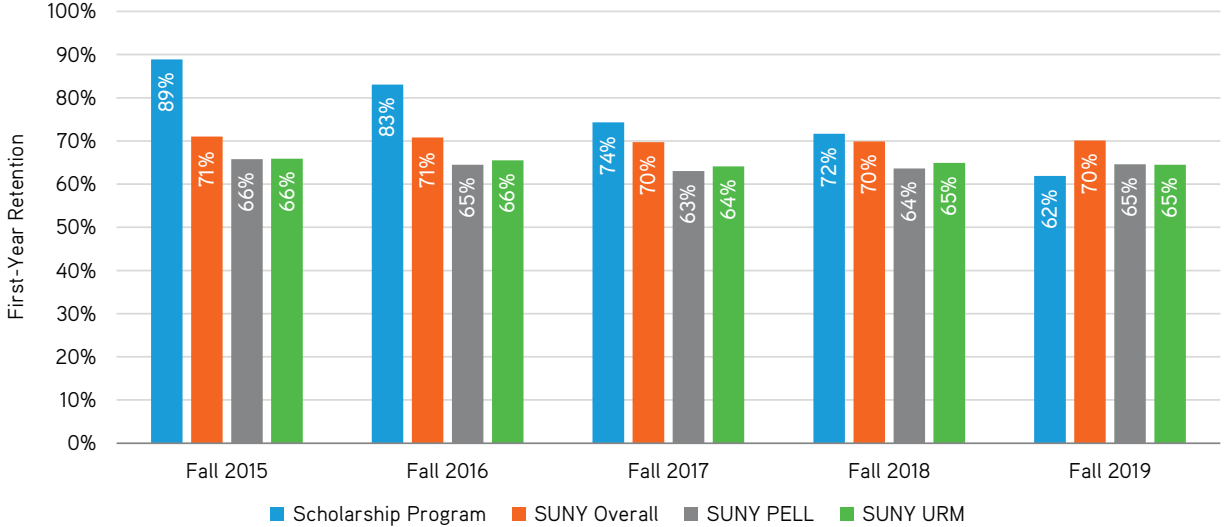
FIGURE 12. Ratio of Credits Attempted to Credits Earned: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2018 to Fall 2021 Cohorts



Retention Rate

Students who receive an FYCSI award reenroll from their first to second year in college at rates higher than all Pell Grant recipients, URMs, and even SUNY overall (Figure 13). As with some of the other outcomes measures presented in this report, it cannot be said with certainty that simply receiving an FYCSI award in one’s first year at SUNY causes a higher reenrollment rate, as the characteristics of students who pursue FYCSI aid may be more directly tied to the cause for reenrollment.

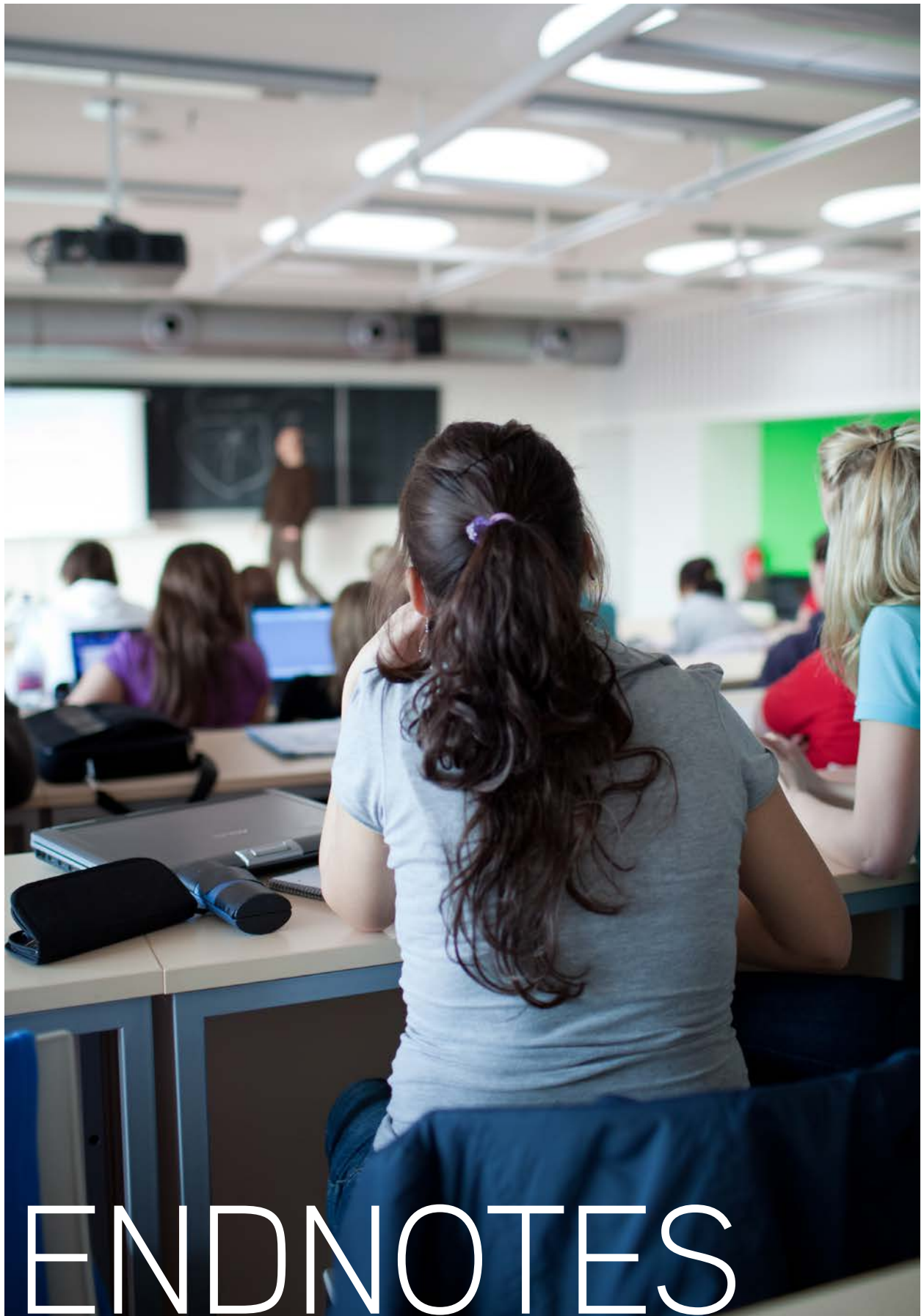
FIGURE 13. First-Year Retention Rate: FYCSI, SUNY Total, PELL Grant, and URM, Fall 2015 to Fall 2019 Cohorts



Conclusion

The Foster Youth College Success Initiative at SUNY has offered critical financial support to young adults who have experienced foster care, aiding their journeys to and through college. Data indicates that FYCSI recipients are not only reenrolling at higher rates than their peers but also achieving superior graduation rates for associate degrees and, after six years, bachelor's degrees. Data also show that the initiative may play a role in narrowing the graduation rate gap among racial groups, which is particularly notable considering that financial assistance typically covers only a portion of the students' enrollment period.

Although FYCSI is a relatively recent program and comprehensive data analysis is ongoing, the increasing demand for this support and the encouraging early results point to its potential impact. The program is growing each year in the number of students reached, meeting a demand for funds that is clearly there, and early results are promising.



ENDNOTES

- 1 *The AFCARS Report: New York* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2022), 2. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-ny-2021.pdf>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid, 3.
- 4 Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. §§ 671-679b), and at "Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, Public Law 106-169—December 14, 1999," <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-106publ169/pdf/PLAW-106publ169.pdf>.
- 5 See, for example, "John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood," Compilation of the Social Security Laws, US Social Security Administration, https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0477.htm; and, "H.R. 6893—Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008," Congress.gov, October 7, 2008, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-bill/6893/text>.
- 6 Mark E. Courtney, et al., *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26* (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2011), 20 and Table 15, <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Midwest-Eval-Outcomes-at-Age-26.pdf>. (Peer group comparisons from the Add Health study at: "Social, Behavioral, and Biological Linkages Across the Life Course," Add Health, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://addhealth.cpc.unc.edu/>.)
- 7 Ibid, 21 and Table 16.
- 8 Ibid, 22.
- 9 Ibid, 21 and Table 22 and Table 24.
- 10 Ibid, 105 and Figure 1 Figure 2.
- 11 "51 Useful Aging Out of Foster Care Statistics," National Foster Youth Initiative, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://nfyi.org/51-useful-aging-out-of-foster-care-statistics-social-race-media/#:~:text=After%20reaching%20the%20age%20of,by%20the%20age%20of%2024>.
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- 13 "Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)," City University of New York, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://www.cuny.edu/academics/academic-programs/seek-college-discovery/youth-matter/>.
- 14 S.8003/A.9003, Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2023-24) <https://www.budget.ny.gov/pubs/archive/fy23/ex/approps/local.pdf>.
- 15 S.4003D/A.3003D, Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2023-24) <https://nyassembly.gov/2023budget/2023bills/enacted/A3003d.pdf>.
- 16 SUNY Data Warehouse and SUNY System Administration Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics, October 2023.
- 17 *Fostering Youth Success Alliance, Prepared for Submission to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the FY 2023 Executive Budget Proposal*, New York State Senate, February 7, 2022, https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/fostering_youth_success_alliance.22.pdf.
- 18 Data source for all analysis: SUNY Data Warehouse and SUNY System Administration Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics, October 2023.
- 19 This figure excludes three students from fall 2021 for whom SUNY's financial aid data show as receiving an award but are not included in enrollment data records.



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