PRACTICES with PROMISE
The Guardian Scholars Program:
Skyline College
THE GUARDIAN SCHOLARS PROGRAM: SKYLINE COLLEGE

Former foster youth in the Bay Area, are one step closer to reaching their college dreams thanks to an innovative approach to delivering full-service student supports at Skyline College.

Youth formerly in foster care are among the most disadvantaged students in higher education. The challenges they face begin when they are children and often follow them through adulthood. Skyline College has developed an innovative approach to offering full-service student supports that can help reverse those negative trends and overcome the significant barriers that current and former foster youth encounter on their path to reach their college dreams.

Its picturesque setting, nestled in the hills of San Bruno just outside of South San Francisco, is seemingly the perfect environment to achieve Skyline College’s mission to “empower and transform a global community of learners.” However, the reality is that for some students that vision is much easier to realize than for others.
The path to student success is far less linear for current and former foster youth. Navigating higher education is simply more challenging when many foster students struggle with basic unmet needs including housing, transportation, healthcare, and the lack of a family support structure.

According to Education Reach for every 100 students leaving foster care approximately:

Half will complete high school...

Only 10 – 15 will enroll in college or a university...

Just seven will receive an associate’s degree or certificate from a community college...

And only two will earn a bachelor’s degree

Source: J. Emerson, Casey Family Programs, April 2012

Figure 1: Foster Youth Population in California by Race (2014)


Recognizing that every year in California about 4,000 youth age out of foster care without adequate social support or life skills, in 2014, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation\(^1\) partnered with Skyline College to launch an integrated system of student support services for current and former foster youth at their campus.

Source: California Community College Chancellor’s Office (2016)

15,688 foster youth are enrolled in the California Community College system. In Fall of 2015, total California Community College enrollment was 1,583,895.

Source: California Community College Chancellor’s Office (2016)
Skyline College seeks to end these troubling statistics by modeling a student-centered campus-based program that provides current and former foster youth with a suite of wraparound services and supports designed to ensure that they thrive both in community college and in life.
The ‘Guardian Scholars Student Center’ was strategically placed in the heart of the Skyline College campus and designed to become a home-base, promote a feeling of comradery and act as a safe-space for foster students. Couches, bright pillows, and a television adorn the cozy room and the energy and constant foot traffic mimic the same dynamics of a household family room.

Retention Specialist Tia Holiday, a former foster youth herself, shares that a culture of “high-expectations” and a refusal to let students “fail” sets the tone for the resilience, courage, and determination that program staff are hoping to nurture in their student population.

Warm and gregarious, Tia easily connects with her students because she has walked in their shoes. Born in East Los Angeles to a drug addicted mother, as an infant, Tia was fortunate enough to be placed in a loving foster home. Her world was, however, upended when at the tender age of ten she lost her foster mother to cancer. Defying the odds, after many stops and starts, Tia found her way into higher education where she credits the Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State University with turning her life around.

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Established more than a decade ago, Guardian Scholars is among the most comprehensive programs serving former foster care youth who are pursuing their undergraduate degrees. The model is solely dedicated to supporting ambitious, college-bound students exiting the foster care system. Given the program's impact, a growing number of colleges, universities, and vocational schools have instituted the program on their campus, including the following:

- American Career College
- California State University, Chico
- California State University, Los Angeles
- California State University, San Bernardino
- California State University, Stanislaus
- California State University, San Francisco
- California State University, San Jose
- California State University, East Bay
- California State University, Fullerton
- California State University, San Marcos
- California Polytechnic, Pomona
- Chapman University
- City College of San Francisco
- Concordia University
- Cuyamaca Community College
- Cypress College
- Fullerton College
- Grossmont Community College
- Hope International University
- Loyola Marymount University
- Mira Costa Community College
- Napa Valley College
- Orange Coast College
- Santa Ana College
- Taller San Jose
- University of California, Irvine
- University of California, Los Angeles
- University of California, Santa Cruz
- University of Southern California
- San Diego City College
- San Diego Miramar College
- Santiago Canyon College
- Skyline College

(Left to Right) Dominique Bill, Soledad McCarthy, Cee-Cee Kelly
Last Photo (Top left to Right) Latisha Truvillon, Harmonie Taylor, Serena Ng, Cee-Cee Kelly, Tia Holiday, Serina O'gilive
Skyline College’s Guardian Scholars program would never have gotten off the ground without the support of key faculty members and, founding Program Services Coordinator and Business Instructor, Soledad McCarthy who jumped at the opportunity to be at the forefront of this work at her college. Having previously served as adjunct faculty and as a financial literacy coach to students, Soledad felt that gaining faculty buy-in would be key to the success of the program. Operating under the belief that in order to succeed they must 1) grow campus awareness of the many challenges that foster students face and, 2) cultivate a stronger relationship between faculty and the foster students in their classes, Soledad began methodically reaching out to faculty and classified staff both one-on-one and at professional learning sessions. "Sometimes you might get push back from faculty if asked to do something because they don’t feel like people understand their workload but in this case they knew that I was one of them," says Soledad. “It allowed me to remind faculty why we were here; to serve the students. That understanding led to everything, from letting foster youth who missed registration deadlines into waitlisted classes to building real relationships on campus with instructors that now work better with our students.”

This relationship includes daily check-ins with the 63 foster students that the program serves and notifying instructors when, due to unforeseen life challenges, a student is forced to miss classes. Together, working alongside Foster Youth Liaison Jocelyn Villa (a 2016 California Community College Classified Employee of the Year), they make a dynamic team diligently striving to make every student feel valued and supported to reach their college goals.

Soledad shared that their philosophy is not to assert that they know what a student needs but instead to ask them, “How can we support your success?” The needs of their Guardian Scholar students are wide ranging from transportation, school supplies, meals to book vouchers. Chafee eligible students receive some assistance. The program supplements what is not covered by financial aid.

A Chafee Grant is free money for current or former California foster youth to help pay for college or career and technical training. Chafee Grants do not have to be paid back. Recipients may also use their grant to pay for child care, rent and transportation while in school. A Chafee Grant is a federal and state funded grant subject to yearly availability of funds and awards are up to $5,000 per student annually.
ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

The two greatest barriers to retention for current and former foster youth at Skyline College - housing and mental health services - have been harder to address. The Skyline team has leveraged every community resource, built partnerships with local agencies, and still often find their foster students grappling with homelessness. They have pieced together temporary housing, even purchased roll-up cots to provide to those students most in need. However, the cost of housing in the Bay Area and the scarcity of affordable housing has made this a herculean task. Remarkably compassionate and resourceful, the program’s students have been known to become roommates and even offer their couches and assistance getting on affordable housing waitlists until a struggling student can get back on their feet. Tia Holiday said, “Part of what we do is teach our students to be their own best advocates and how to navigate the system to meet their needs.”

Those needs include counseling for past trauma and abuse. In 2015, this led Skyline College President Dr. Regina Stanback Stroud to make a strategic investment in a dedicated psychologist/counselor for Guardian Scholars and veterans (previously the campus had only two psychology counselors serving more than 8,000 students). Soledad McCarthy says “‘Get in. Get through. And get out’ is the Skyline promise but that’s easier for some students than others and Dr. Stanback Stroud wants foster students to be fully supported and integrated into the fabric of everything we do.”
This commitment is evident as you look around campus. There are flyers for a “Healing through Hip Hop” workshop led by Guardian Scholar Student Ambassadors who also go into campus classrooms to share information about services for foster students. These same ambassadors also host summits on pressing topics like domestic violence and accessing the services necessary to succeed in college and career.

Due largely to greater awareness through exemplary campus outreach efforts, in the 2015-16 academic year, Skyline’s Guardian Scholars Program served 63 of its 93 self-identified foster students. The students are predominately between the ages of 18-25, female and tend to be Black and Latino.

Though the program is in its early stages (it just wrapped its first full academic year), this intense model of intervention appears to be having real impact. With a modest $155,000 initial investment, Soledad believes they have institutionalized a culture ready to meet the demands of current and former foster youth. This includes encouraging foster students to step forward and be counted. The dedication and proactive interventions of the Guardian Scholars Program to better serve foster youth show significant promise. This is why we are proud to profile this Practice with Promise.
ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

The Campaign for College Opportunity is a broad-based, bipartisan coalition, including business, education and civil rights leaders that is dedicated to ensuring that all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college in order to build a vibrant workforce, economy and democracy. The Campaign works to create an environment of change and lead the state toward effective policy solutions. It is focused upon substantially increasing the number of students attending two-and four-year colleges in California so that we can produce the 2.3 million additional college graduates that our state needs.

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