

# Engaging and Supporting Students with a Foster Care Background in College: Lessons Learned from the Covid-19 Pandemic

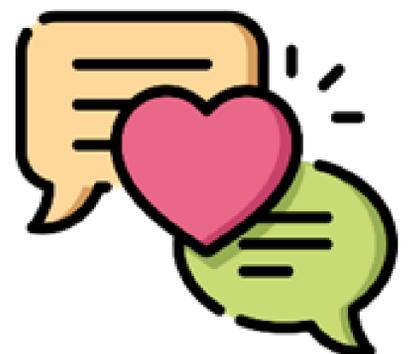
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College students across the country continue to experience social, emotional, and academic challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Students with foster care backgrounds are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of familial safety net, scarce resources, and trauma histories. During the pandemic, administrators and staff at campus support programs (CSPs) serving students with foster care backgrounds have stepped up to ensure the well-being of students on and off-campus. Staff and students have had to adapt to flexible and creative ways to meet the needs of students during this difficult time. This document provides some recommendations for serving students in college during challenging times, based on study findings from focus groups with staff and students involved with CSPs at various stages of the Covid-19 pandemic.

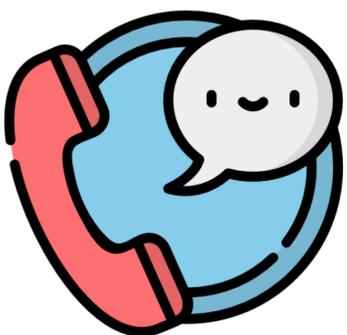
## In-Person Connection & Flexible Meeting Format

If possible, have the first meeting (or first few meetings) with students in person. It's really important to meet face-to-face in the same physical space, especially with new students. This will be a foundation for future contacts. For future one-on-one meetings, ask the student which format they prefer (e.g., in-person or virtual). Being attentive to students' other commitments (e.g., work, caring for family) and circumstances (e.g., long commute to school) will support more consistent engagement.



## Personalized Check-Ins

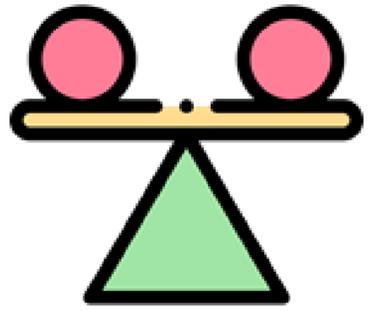
Personalized, one-on-one check-ins with students go a long way in building a trusting relationship. These check-ins do not need to be in-person (e.g., could be a quick phone call, virtual check-in, back-and-forth text exchange). Taking a trauma informed approach when checking in with students communicates care and creates deeper connections. A trauma informed approach during check-ins prioritizes a student's well-being, personal success and challenges, then one can address any technical issues a student may have (e.g. - navigating academic and skill building issues). Establishing a personal, caring connection may also help the student to engage in other areas (e.g., academic planning).



"[CSP staff] reached out a good couple of times and personally ask me how I was doing, even though I wasn't exactly attending... I feel like I'm still on their minds.. which I really appreciated. It made me feel like I was a part of the group, even though I wasn't entirely always there." (student)

## Consistency is Key

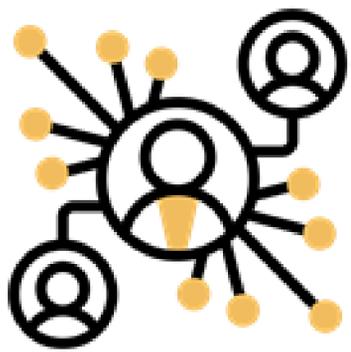
Consistency in the midst of ups and downs was a stabilizing factor for students. This included offering programs consistently even if attendance was not high, sending information even if students did not reply, and figuring out ways to preserve in-person CSP routines and traditions (e.g., informal drop-in hours, celebrating birthdays and holidays) in a virtual environment.



*"I think I would say one of the things that we've tried to do even more so is be consistent. I don't know how to say it any better than that. I think our students look forward to certain things that we've done previously. So anything that we could translate into a virtual space, we did." (CSP Staff)*

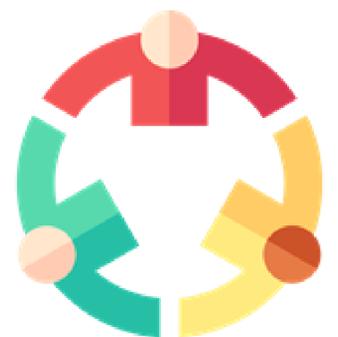
## One-Stop Communication

There's also important information that the CSP needs to get to students. However, we've learned that CSP staff and students are feeling bombarded with emails and other forms of communication. One way to streamline communication and to maximize its usefulness to students is to create and maintain an online platform (e.g., Canvas) that can be the hub and for important resources - a one-stop-shop. Workshops and one-on-one meetings with students can also be offered when needed for specific topics through these platforms or the ones already being used by the institution and faculty, and ones that students prefer. To do that, it's important for administrators and staff to check-in with students regularly to ensure ease and accessibility of technology and information. Students can also serve in a role of providing feedback, ideas for programming, and information and resource sharing.



## Creative Ways to Deepen Sense of Belonging & Community

Students asked for engaging meetings that are fun and offer a way to connect with other students in the CSP and feel part of a community. CSP staff say these events were best attended. An important strategy is to actively engage students to choose topics and plan events as well as facilitate them (e.g., DJing, games, activities that get students to know each other better, etc.). These activities deepen connection and foster belongingness.



## Training and Sustaining Peer Mentors

Being a peer mentor can take an emotional toll on students, especially in difficult times like the pandemic when they hear stories of hardships and troubling situations that their mentees are experiencing. It is important to proactively prepare peer mentors through training (e.g., setting role boundaries, equipping them with resources they can provide mentees), self-care strategies, and spaces where they can process emotions (e.g., mentor support groups).



## Staff Wellness & Meaningful Connections

We observed that CSPs with smaller staff-to-student ratios gave staff the time to build personal connections with students, and these connections went a long way. Students felt like someone cared about them and were more likely to turn to staff for help. Meaningful relationships with students, that go beyond simply handling logistics, are the engine of CSPs. We recommend a staff-to-student ratio of about 1 to 20 or 25. This ratio would also help to promote wellness among CSP staff. In order to achieve this, CSPs need consistent and adequate funding.

