

The Center For **FAIRFUTURES** ➔

GUIDE TO THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROGRAM

SUMMARY

The College Choice Program, which used to be known as the FCSI/Dorm Project, is a year-round program that provides housing, tutoring, coaching, and financial support to students in NYC foster care attending college in New York and beyond. Every student in foster care who is attending college should apply to receive funding through College Choice every semester.

The College Choice Program is administered by ACS with the support of the New York Foundling and staff at foster care providers:

- ACS funds and oversees the program.
- The Foundling maintains the program's online application and provides coaching and tutoring to students in the program.
- Staff at agencies (including Fair Futures coaches and college specialists) help ensure that every eligible student knows about the program.

The goal of the program is to increase the college graduation rate for students in care while supporting them toward success as independent adults. Students need not be dorming or attending CUNY in order to participate in the program; the financial, tutoring, coaching, and career support elements will be open to students in NYC foster care attending any college.

This guide will outline the main components and benefits of the College Choice Program, describe what students need to do to apply to the program and maintain their eligibility, and answer some common questions. Students and agency staff who have additional questions or concerns should reach out to ACS's College Choice team at collegechoicebenefitsprogram@acs.nyc.gov.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR COLLEGE CHOICE?

STUDENTS MUST:

- Be currently in foster care as of their initial entry into the College Choice program. Students who are adopted, reunified, or leave to KinGAP **before** starting the College Choice program become **ineligible for funding**.
Students who leave foster care while receiving College Choice support will continue to be eligible for the program.
- Be enrolled or planning to enroll full-time at in an accredited not-for-profit bachelor's or associate degree program (students in certificate programs and students attending for-profit schools are not eligible)
"Full-time enrollment" means having at least 12 credits or credit equivalents. This includes non-credited hours spent in developmental or remedial courses (Example: if a student has 9 credits + 1 remedial that meets for 4 hours/week, that student is full-time). Students should contact the registrar at their college if they are unsure whether they are scheduled for full-time classes. Students in CUNY Start are not eligible for College Choice funding.
- Have applied to all financial aid sources including TAP, Pell, and ETV
- Have a GPA of 2.0 or above
(students with GPAs below 2.0 may be accepted if they submit an academic plan made with their advisor)

SERVICES OFFERED BY THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROGRAM

College Choice offers a wide range of supports and services that students can pick and choose from upon applying to the program. The financial support offered by the College Choice program is particularly extensive.

It includes:

- **Up to \$15,000 in tuition and fees each year**
- **Up to \$30,000 toward the cost of housing each year**
- **A stipend of \$60/day** for each day the student is enrolled full-time in school

This stipend can be continued for up to 6 months after college graduation (either from a 2-year or 4-year program, but the 6-month extension can only be used once).

All **tuition and housing funding** listed above is **last dollar** gap funding paid directly to a college or housing provider.

Last dollar gap funding means that money will only be paid in the event that a student has a balance on their account after all of their financial aid is applied. Most students attending CUNY and SUNY schools will not need to make any use of the tuition funding offered through College Choice (though they would receive the stipend and assistance with funding housing if needed). The amount of gap funding being offered opens up the range of schools that are financially viable for independent students in foster care; HBCUs like Howard University and Spelman College, out of state schools like Penn State or University of Connecticut, and private schools without need-met financial aid, like Fordham University, are all possibilities with College Choice funding.

The **stipend**, on the other hand, is paid directly to the student by their foster care agency. The disbursement schedule is determined by the foster care agency and the agency will be reimbursed by ACS.

For students **dorming in New York City**, the College Choice program is partnered with a range of housing providers including the Towers at City College, The Summit at Queens College, the 92nd Street Y, and Outpost Club.

The program also comes with **free coaching, tutoring, and career counseling support** through The New York Foundling. This support is **optional**, and students do not need to participate in order to receive the financial benefit of College Choice.

PERMANENCY PLANNING IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS

The level of financial support offered by College Choice has important permanency planning implications for college-bound students.

If a college-bound student leaves foster care prior to joining College Choice, they render themselves ineligible for all of the financial resources listed above, which can total up to \$60,000/year (and typically would be at least \$13,000/year for students receiving the stipend only).

On the other hand, if a student remains in foster care until the time they first join College Choice, they will stay eligible for the program as long as they meet the other eligibility criteria.

Because of the magnitude of this funding, students who are considering permanency while planning to attend college need to understand how their permanency plan will impact College Choice eligibility.

HOW DO STUDENTS GET INTO THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROGRAM?

Students start by applying to the College Choice portal at fosteringcollegesuccessinitiative.org.

To apply for College Choice, students must create an account in the College Choice portal by a deadline that is typically a few weeks before the start of the semester, and must subsequently submit a set of supporting documents (described below) through the portal. **Students should create a College Choice portal account by the deadline even if they do not have all of the supporting documents ready.**

Once the student has applied, the College Choice team will request a set of supporting documents including:

- A **bursar bill** showing the financial aid that the student is set to receive
- A **proof-of-enrollment letter** from the student's college
- The student's **schedule** showing full-time registration
- The student's **academic calendar**
- If the student is dorming, a copy of their **lease agreement**
- For continuing college students, a copy of their **unofficial transcript**
- If the student drops below a 2.0 GPA, an academic plan signed by their academic advisor clearly outlining their plan to improve (not just a set of courses and desired grades, but a set of concrete steps like going to tutoring or meeting with the advisor regularly).

All College Choice documents must be submitted as .pdf files – no screenshots or pictures of the documents are allowed.

Sometimes, the needed documents are already available as .pdf files online – in this case, the student only needs to download the file. In other cases, a .pdf file needs to be made from a web page. The best way to do this is usually to right click the page in your computer browser and select the "print" option, and then select the "save as PDF" or "Microsoft Print to PDF" option.

Students who are dorming outside NYC or at other institutions will need to make arrangements for their housing provider to be paid by ACS by signing up as a payee of the City of New York at www.nyc.gov/pip. **Students who are dorming with a private landlord** will need to submit an invoice along with the signed lease agreement showing the vendor's legal name, vendor #, address, student name, and amount due for the full semester (ACS pays for the full semester at once rather than making monthly payments). Anyone who runs into challenges with the above should reach out to the College Choice team right away.

TIP! The College Choice team will provide an updated timeline with admissions requirements to the agencies before each semester.

WHAT ARE THE ONGOING REQUIREMENTS OF STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROGRAM?

STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROGRAM ARE EXPECTED TO:

- Renew College Choice funding each semester
- Submit all required documents to the College Choice program team
- Maintain good academic standing
- Remain enrolled full-time in college
- Follow the rules of their host dorm, if dorming
- Re-apply for all available financial aid every year
- Recertify full-time status

TIPS & FAQs

If a student is in care when they're accepted to College Choice, but then leaves care due to adoption or KinGAP, would they still be eligible for the Dorm Project?

Yes. If a student is in care when they start College Choice and is subsequently adopted or leaves care via kinGAP would be able to stay in the program and would receive the same supports and funding as any other student.

If a student in foster care wants to dorm outside of CUNY or out of state, is that possible?

Yes! While the College Choice program has several dorming partners within NYC, College Choice funding can be used to dorm away at any accredited not-for-profit 2-year or 4-year college.

Does College Choice provide dorm supplies for participating students?

No. Basic furnishings like desks, chairs, bed frames, and mattresses may be provided in furnished dorms but otherwise students need to bring their own supplies to the dorm. Agencies are responsible for helping students move in and making sure they have the college supplies they need.

A good college packing list can be found here for dorms:

bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/making-a-decision/off-to-college-checklist

Note that off-campus housing may not be fully-furnished and students should take care when selecting a dorm to make sure that they are able to furnish and outfit their dorm room appropriately.

Are undocumented students eligible for College Choice?

Yes, they are.

When a student in the College Choice program turns 21, does their agency need to submit a CCS21+ application for the student to continue in the program?

No. In this situation, there is no need for either an CCS21+ or CRB Exceptional Payment. ACS will continue to send youth's monthly stipend allocation to agencies and agencies should continue to transfer the weekly stipend into youth direct deposit accounts.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS THAT FOSTER CARE AGENCY STAFF CAN DO TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROGRAM?

- Help students apply to colleges before November and ensure that they have their CUNYFirst, FAFSA, and ETV information organized and easy to access. Assist with gathering the documentation required by ACS for students to join the program
- Make sure that before students move into the dorm, they have all of the dorm supplies that they need and that they've applied for the New Yorkers for Children Back to School Package so they'll have a laptop on the first day of class.
- Build relationships with staff at the school your student will be attending, particularly in the bursar's office and student housing office. College Choice funding usually arrives well after the semester is underway, and anyone who is responsible for receiving payment at the college needs to understand and be on board with the timeline so your student does not face negative consequences to their course registration or housing status. **Time spent explaining the program early can avert disaster later.**
- Make sure that your finance department is disbursing the stipend to students regularly, and never hold back the stipend for any reason while the student is in the program.
- If there is a delay in the student's book check or stipend, it's good practice for the agency to step in and assist the student financially. Delays in the book voucher are not uncommon, particularly during a student's first semester, and when students can't get their books, it can be disastrous to their academic progress. Be aware that many courses require online access and not everything can be found in the library.
- Be an advocate for the student! College Choice is a relatively new program and challenges can sometimes arise in the application process. Do not wait to reach out to the College Choice team if a problem comes up, or if you have a question.**