



POLICY BRIEF

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An Evaluation of Liaison Legislation and Campus Support Programs for Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students Who Have Experienced Foster Care

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Background and Study Goals

The majority of foster youth want to go to college (Courtney et al., 2004; McMillen et al., 2003). However, 2019 research revealed that only 3.5% of Texas youth who experienced foster care achieved any post-secondary credential by the age of 24 (Watt et al., 2019). Fortunately, there is a statewide movement to develop support services on college campuses for students who have experienced foster care (SEFC). In 2015 and 2019, Texas demonstrated a commitment to this effort by passing legislation requiring all public colleges and universities to appoint a liaison to assist foster care alumni (FCA) on their campuses and for these liaisons to reach out and provide information, resources, and support to SEFC (House Bills 3748 and 1702). Additionally, several schools have created more comprehensive campus support programs (CSPs) offering a broad array of services. Texas policies and programs have garnered national attention. However, these efforts have not been evaluated at the state level. In 2019, our research team received a grant from the Greater Texas Foundation to describe the implementation and assess the impact of the liaison legislation and campus support programming.

In phase one of our research, we conducted a mixed-method study to examine implementation of the liaison legislation and describe the available campus support services. We found that half of all campuses had not posted their liaison contact information on their websites (as mandated by HB 1702) and that the majority of liaisons said they didn't have the time, resources, or training to adequately

KEY FINDINGS

Degree attainment rates for SEFC remain low. Only 4.7% of SEFC obtain a post-secondary credential by age 24. This is an improvement relative to our previous research finding of 3.5% but does not represent substantive progress over time.

The majority of SEFC attend community colleges (74%), and the rate of degree attainment for community colleges relative to the general population is particularly low.

Fall-to-fall retention rates for SEFC did not change over time or in association with either piece of liaison legislation. This was not a surprising finding given that our previous mixed-method study found significant limitations with the implementation of the liaison legislation.

SEFC who attended four-year universities with CSPs were 40% more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than SEFC who attended universities without a CSP. There were no effects of CSPs on retention for SEFC attending community colleges.

perform their role (Watt et al., 2023). We also found that approximately one-third of all campuses reported offering a CSP, but the services

offered and financial support for these programs varied widely (Watt et al., 2023). This variation in the types of services offered by CSPs is also found nationwide (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Nationally, there is some evidence that CSPs can improve outcomes. However, most of these studies lack a comparison group and/or have small samples (Huang et al., 2019; Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Unrau et al., 2017). The strongest study examining the effect of CSPs on retention took a look at SEFC in California, a state that, unlike Texas, provides a substantial amount of funding and support to CSPs (Okpych et al., 2020). In phase two of our research, we aimed to fill some of these gaps in knowledge. We obtained access to data (UH-061) from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to answer the following research questions about SEFC in Texas:

- 1. What are the trends in retention and degree attainment for SEFC?*
- 2. Did the liaison legislation of 2015 and/or 2019 increase SEFC retention rates?*
- 3. Do campuses with CSPs have higher retention rates than campuses without CSPs? Are the results the same for four-year universities and two-year community colleges?*

Key Findings

The findings summarized below provide a sample of the results from our phase two investigation. These findings were disseminated in an Education Reach for Texans national webinar, a landscape analysis conducted for THECB, and a peer-reviewed academic publication (Watt et al., 2025; Watt et al., 2024).

Post-Secondary Achievement of SEFC

We examined a cohort of SEFC who turned 18 in 2014 and followed them through 2021. We found that 4.7% of SEFC achieved a post-secondary credential by age 24 (n=388). More specifically, 3.2% obtained a bachelor's degree (n=263), 1.9% an as-

Methodology

The DFPS and THECB data (UH-061) provided a sample of youth who had been in foster care and turned age 18 in the years 2012 through 2021. We were able to track enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for these students. We examined these rates from before and after the liaison legislation passed. We also merged in primary data gathered in the first phase of our study about which campuses had CSPs and the services they provided. This allowed us to investigate whether campuses with CSPs had higher rates of retention than campuses without CSPs.

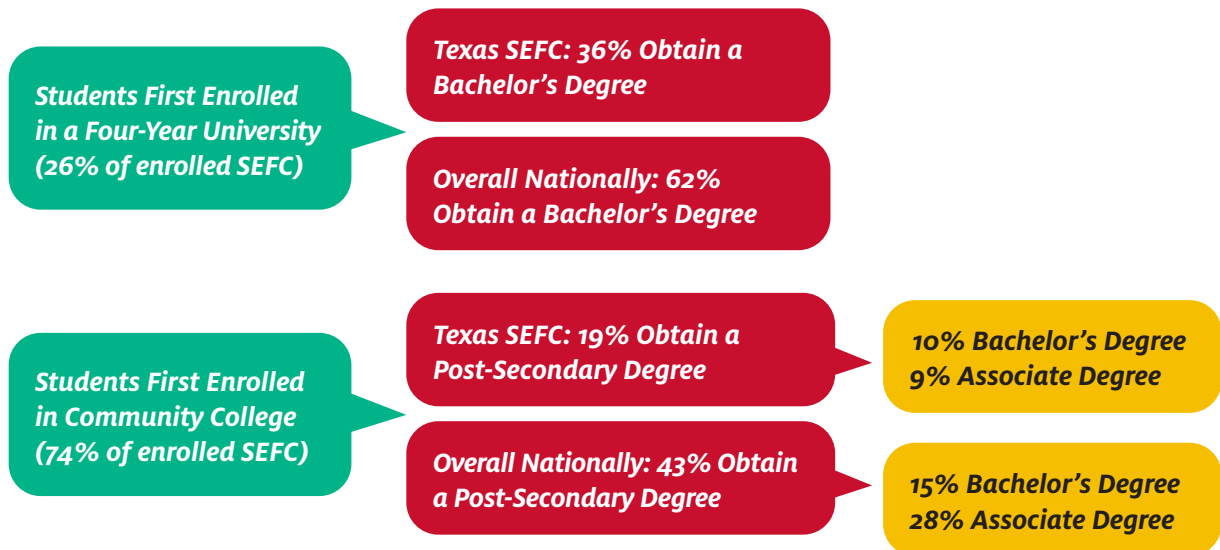
sociate degree (n=155), and 1.5% a vocational certificate (n=127). SEFC could obtain more than one credential (Watt et al., 2025).

We also examined outcomes for different cohorts and time periods. We examined all SEFC who turned 18 in 2019 and found that 4.8% of the total sample achieved a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or vocational certificate during the four-year follow-up period. Because SEFC may take longer than the general student population to complete degrees, we examined an earlier cohort (age 18 in 2012) to identify degree attainment within a nine-year follow-up period. We found that 4.4% of these youth (n=283) received a post-secondary credential by age 27 (Watt et al., 2025).

Examining outcomes for different cohorts and different follow-up periods provides a deeper understanding of outcomes and trends over time. Collectively, these results reveal that post-secondary degree attainment rates have increased in the past 10 years from 3.5% to approximately 5%. However, regardless of the time period or length of follow-up, improvement has been minimal, and degree attainment remains incredibly low.

FIGURE 1

Graduation Rates for Two- and Four-Year Institutions (Six-Year Follow-Up)



We also examined where SEFC in Texas are most likely to exit their higher education trajectories. Major gaps exist at every juncture. The largest loss occurs early, given that 75% of SEFC do not enroll in a post-secondary institution in the six years after turning 18, dramatically reducing the pool of students to support and track in higher education. Figure 1 shows a subsample of SEFC who enrolled in 2015, examining their progress when starting at a four-year university compared with a two-year community college. Graduation rates of SEFC are below national averages for both four-year and two-year institutions (Watt et al., 2025).¹ However, the largest loss—net and relative to national averages—occurs for SEFC first attending community colleges and seeking an associate degree.

Impact of Liaison Legislation

Our second objective was to assess the impact of the Texas liaison legislation passed in 2015 and 2019. We examined fall-to-fall retention rates for

SEFC over time and examined whether increases followed the legislative initiatives. Figure 2 displays those retention rates over time.

The vertical lines in Figure 2 indicate when HB 3748 (2015) and HB 1702 (2019) passed. There were no increases in SEFC retention rates associated with either bill (Watt et al., 2024). These data—along with our interviews, surveys, and website content analyses—suggest that this legislation has potential, but the programs need funding, training, and assessment to be effective (Watt et al., 2023; Watt et al., 2024).

Our study also examined whether campuses with CSPs had better SEFC retention rates (fall-to-fall) than campuses without a CSP. The findings were mixed. Four-year universities with CSPs had significantly higher retention rates than campuses without CSPs when controlling for individual and institutional characteristics. SEFC attending four-year institutions with a CSP had a 41% higher retention rate than SEFC attending comparable institutions without a CSP. For two-year colleges,

¹ National averages are from the National Student Clearinghouse Center for 2015.

CSPs were not associated with SEFC retention rates (Watt et al., 2024).

Finally, we analyzed DFPS and THECB data to identify schools where SEFC are most and least likely to succeed. We examined retention from 2022 to 2023 for all SEFC who enrolled in fall 2022 and separated institutions into four-year universities and two-year community colleges. We examined each institution's SEFC retention rate and compared it with the retention rate for the general student population on that campus (using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data). Figure 3 shows how SEFC retention compares with the retention for the general student population at each institution. Campuses at "0" have SEFC retention rates equal to the general student population. Scores above (and below) zero reflect the percentage point difference between the SEFC retention rate and that of the general student population.

Figure 3 reveals that several institutions have

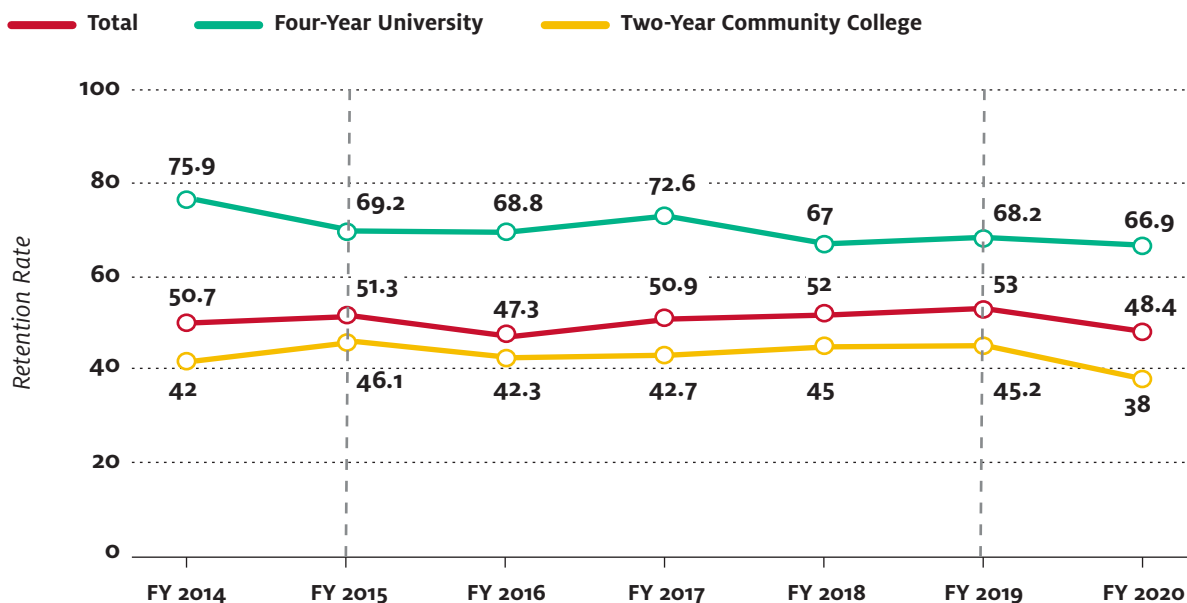
SEFC retention rates equal to or higher than those of the general student population. However, there is wide variation in SEFC retention rates by institution. Some schools exhibit very high retention rates for SEFC, and others exhibit very low rates of retention. These variations are much more pronounced in community colleges.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Texas passed legislation in 2015 and 2019 mandating that a foster care liaison for SEFC be appointed on every campus and that the liaison reach out to SEFC to provide information, resources, and support. Unfortunately, SEFC retention rates did not improve after the legislation. Despite these efforts, only 4.7% of SEFC obtain a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or vocational certificate by age 24. This represents a small improvement from the previous estimate of 3.5%. Success rates are notably poor for SEFC who attend community colleges. Campus support programs have emerged through grassroots efforts, and those at four-year universi-

FIGURE 2

Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates Over Time for SEFC Traditional Cohort



ties seem to have had a positive impact. However, there is wide variation in outcomes by institution, and outcomes are quite poor at community colleges. These data when paired with additional quantitative and qualitative data led our research team to make the following policy recommendations to the THECB in a recent landscape analysis:

Create paid foster care liaison positions in all two- and four-year institutions.

Support and expand initiatives aimed at improving higher education outcomes for SEFC. These are resources and tools that liaisons can use to support SEFC on their campuses: Protect and expand the Texas tuition and fee waiver; increase Cost of Attendance for SEFC; and increase access and enrollment in Transitional Living Services.

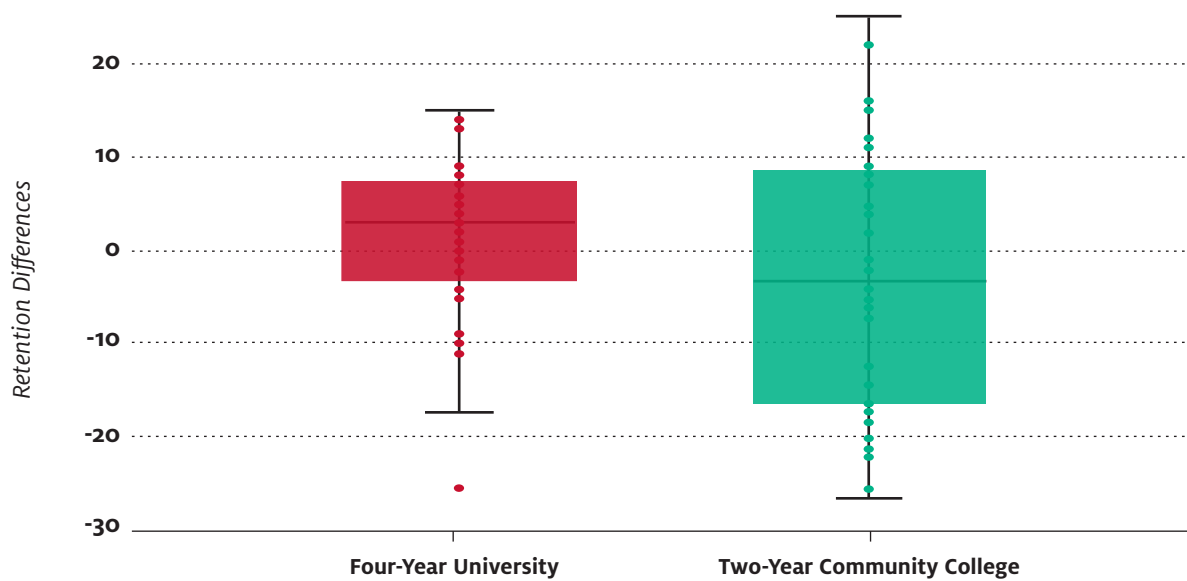
Support [Education Reach for Texans](#) (Reach). Reach is a statewide backbone organization that offers training, creates networking opportunities, and conducts research aimed at promoting post-secondary achievement of SEFC in Texas (Watt et al., 2025).

Summary and Recommendations

Texas liaison legislation has not led to an increase in retention rates for SEFC, and post-secondary achievement remains poor. Campus support programs at four-year universities have improved outcomes but have had no discernible impact at community colleges. These findings when paired with our other quantitative and qualitative data sources suggest liaisons and CSPs need financial support, training opportunities, and ongoing evaluation in order to realize their potential and substantively improve SEFC post-secondary outcomes in Texas.

FIGURE 3

SEFC Retention Relative to General Student Population



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