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The impact of COVID-19 on campus-based support programs serving students with foster care experience: Focus groups with administrators and students

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Foster care
Campus-based support programs
College
Pandemic
COVID-19

ABSTRACT

The onset of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic forced higher education institutions to abruptly transition to remote services and online learning. Students with a foster care background are a subgroup of students who have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, as were the campus-based programs (CSPs) designed to support them. The purpose of this study was to learn about the impact of the pandemic on CSPs and CSP participants. Focus groups were conducted with CSP administrators and separately with CSP students from two- and four-year colleges in California. The first theme that emerged from the data focused on challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, with six subthemes zeroing in on breaks in social connections, academic disruptions, technology woes, gaps in basic needs, employment challenges, and the toll on mental health. The second theme described participants’ responses, including their creative and collaborative actions. Administrators quickly adapted service delivery, formed partnerships with new units and organizations to ensure students’ needs were met, and found creative ways to stay connected with students during a time of pervasive isolation. Students talked about their own efforts to access resources, connect with peers, and use of strategies to manage challenges such as burnout and depression. A second subtheme highlighted the ways participants displayed resilience, such as creating boundaries to manage their own self-care and leaning on each other for support. The findings from this study increase our understanding of the experiences students faced during the pandemic and shed light on implications moving forward to support students with foster care histories in higher education.

1. Introduction

The onset of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020 forced higher education institutions to abruptly transition to remote services and online learning. Higher education scholars have raised concerns about the negative impacts of the pandemic on students, which have led to increased financial and material hardships, disruptions in important social connections, and reduced access to important resources (Lederer & Stolow, 2021). One study of 2,031 students attending Texas A&M reported high levels of depression (48 %) and anxiety (38 %) that reached a moderate to severe level (Wang et al., 2020). In this study, nearly-three in four students (71 %) reported that their stress/anxiety level had increased during the pandemic, and only about two in five (43 %) said they were able to adequately cope (Wang et al., 2020). Another smaller study of 195 college students found that the majority of participants struggled with difficulty concentrating (89 %), sleep disruptions (86 %), decreased social interactions (86 %), and heightened concerns about their academic performance (82 %) (Son...
Students with foster care backgrounds are a subgroup of students who were particularly hard hit by the pandemic. These students make up a small percentage of the college student body but face considerable obstacles to completing a degree (Geiger et al., 2018; Piel, 2018). Trauma from past maltreatment and separation from caregivers, placement changes and school disruptions during their time in care, and limited financial resources and family support during college can place these students at increased risk of dropping out (Okpych, 2021). Previous studies have found that fewer than 1 in 10 foster youth complete a two-year or four-year degree (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2020), and college students with foster care experience are more likely to drop out than low-income first-generation students (Day et al., 2011; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Thus, students with foster care backgrounds may face additional barriers to persisting in college during the pandemic.

The federal government responded to this crisis and allocated funding to support older youth in foster care. Enacted on December 27, 2020, Division X (“Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act”) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L.116–260) allocated an additional $350 M for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (House Ways and Means Committee, 2021). Importantly, given the economic and housing crises created by the pandemic, the law temporarily waived the 30% spending cap that states are allowed to spend on housing costs. This gave states more flexibility to use the Chafee funds in areas where it is most needed. The law also allocated an additional $50 M for the Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV) program and increased the maximum ETV award amount from $5,000 to $12,000 through September 2022. Additionally, the limit age for Chafee services and ETVs was increased to age 27 (Fernandez-Alcantara, 2021). Division X also made important changes around extended foster care. The law prohibited states from requiring youth to exit foster care when they reach the state’s age limit, which in effect allowed youth to remain in care past the state’s age limit. Additionally, states were required to allow youth to voluntarily re-enter foster care if they had aged out of care during the pandemic. Taken together, these provisions added significant support to foster youth in college, particularly if they are still in care and if they are eligible for Chafee services and ETVs.

2. Literature review

2.1. Campus support programs that serve students with foster care histories

Over the past decade there has been a surge in the growth of campus-based support programs (CSPs) that specifically serve college students with foster care backgrounds. In 1998, the Guardian Scholars program at California State University - Fullerton was the first CSP established. Today, the number of CSPs nationwide has grown into the hundreds, including more than 115 located in two-year and four-year campuses in California (Okpych et al., 2020). CSPs can vary greatly from campus to campus, ranging from small programs with just one paid staff to programs with several staff that serve hundreds of students (Geiger et al., 2018). CSPs also vary in the types and intensity of the services that are offered, with most offering one-on-one advising, peer-support programs, and skill-building workshops to CSP participants. Many programs also connect students to other campus units (e.g., Office of Student Disabilities, financial aid, tutoring). Funding for CSPs also varies and can originate from public, private, philanthropic, or college funds, or a combination of sources (Geiger et al., 2018). Many of the services provided by CSPs are often high-touch and in-person, which have been compromised by the onset of the pandemic, forcing them to rapidly reconfigure how they operate.

2.2. Experiences of youth with foster care histories during the pandemic

2.2.1. Overview of studies

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. At the time this manuscript was submitted for peer-review in summer 2021, six known studies had surveyed foster youth about their experiences during the pandemic and published findings. These studies used convenience samples and used professional networks, online platforms (e.g., Facebook), and in some cases paid advertisements to recruit participants to complete online surveys. A summary of the survey dates, number of participants, age range of participants, and geographic regions included in each study are reported in Table 1.

The following sections summarize findings from the six studies in several areas: (1) Financial Hardships, Housing, and Basic Needs; (2) Physical and Psychological Wellbeing; (3) Relationships and Personal Connections; and (4) Employment and Education. It is important to note that all six studies used convenience sampling to recruit participants. Thus, although each study collected information from hundreds of foster youth, the findings may not be representative of the larger population of foster youth within the age ranges of the studies. For example, hard-to-reach youth (e.g., youth who are incarcerated; youth in extreme poverty; youth who were not connected to organizations, listservs, and social media groups) are likely underrepresented in this study. Had the experiences of hard-to-reach foster youth been included in these studies, the picture of how foster youth are faring during the pandemic may have differed.

2.2.2. Financial hardships, housing, and basic needs

One group of topics all six surveys asked about involved hardships with finances, housing, and basic needs. Ruff and Linville (2021) found that about three in five respondents (61%) were “moderately concerned” or “extremely concerned” about their finances. Food insecurity was also a concern for the young people participating in the studies. For instance, more than half of youth (55%) faced food insecurity in the study by Greeson and colleagues (2020) and nearly a fifth of young people reported that they ran out of food in the second and third FosterClub studies (2020b, 2020c). Housing instability was also a concern for some youth with a care history. For example, about two-fifths of youth in the third FosterClub study (40%) reported that they had been homeless.

Table 1

| Study                      | Dates of survey administration | Number of participants | Ages of participants | Number of U.S. States represented |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| FosterClub                 |                                 |                        |                     |                                 |
| (2020a)                    | March 2020                      | 172                    | 18-24               | Not reported                    |
| Greeson et al.             |                                 |                        |                     |                                 |
| (2020)                     | April 2020                      | 281                    | 18-23               | 23 states                       |
| FosterClub                 |                                 |                        |                     |                                 |
| (2020b)                    | May 2020                        | 613                    | 18-24               | 44 states                       |
| Ruff & Linville (2021)     |                                 |                        |                     |                                 |
| FosterClub (2020c)         | May and June 2020               | 127                    | 18-26               | 11 states (89% from CA and AZ)  |
| JBAY (2021)                |                                 | 474                    | 18-24               | 45 states                       |
|                           |                                 | 598*                   | 18-24               | California                      |

* Included youth who had been in foster care or experienced homelessness.

1 The food insecurity question included youth not being able to access food, having very low access to food, or having access to some food.
forced to move or feared that they would be forced to move. The JBAY study (2021) found that about one-fifth of respondents (22 %) experienced homelessness in the year since the pandemic began. The pandemic also caused strain on youths’ financial situations and their need for public assistance. For example, only one in three youth (33 %) in the first FosterClub (2020a) study said they had enough money to last a week, and about the same percentage of youth in the Greeson and colleagues (2020) study applied for some form of public assistance that they did not already have prior to COVID-19.

2.2.3. Physical and psychological wellbeing

In the three studies that asked youth about their psychological wellbeing during the pandemic, there were varying levels of concern. For example, two in five (39 %) participants in the Ruff and Linville (2021) study stated that they were “moderately concerned” or “extremely concerned” about their mental health (i.e., depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns), while nearly double the percentage (80 %) of participants in the JBAY study “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that the pandemic has had a major impact on their mental health and wellness. Greeson et al. (2020) found that more than half of the participants (56 %) had a positive screen for depression and/or anxiety symptoms that would indicate that further diagnostic evaluation was warranted. Physical health concerns were somewhat less prevalent, with less than one-third (32 %) of participants in the Ruff and Linville (2021) study reporting moderate or extreme concern about physical health (i.e., illness, symptoms, fatigue, physical activity, sleep, overall health).

2.2.4. Relationships and personal connections

All six studies reported that youths’ social relationships and personal connections were negatively affected by the pandemic. For example, in the Greeson et al. study (2020), more than a third of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the pandemic was having a major impact on their connections to siblings and peers (36 %) and on their connections to other adults (36 %). The FosterClub studies found that a nontrivial minority of youth felt the financial brunt of the crisis, facing food shortages, money worries, and concerns about losing a place to stay. Mental health was an area that was particularly hard hit, with high rates of depression and anxiety symptoms reported by participants. Youths’ relationships with family members and adults was also impacted, and about one in five youth felt they were entirely on their own. Like many other young people, job loss and significant decreases in work hours was also prevalent, and one study reported that educational pursuits were derailed for some youth and about one in five had difficulty focusing.

It is difficult to gauge how the challenges experienced by foster youth during the pandemic compare to challenges experienced by their peers, both because survey questions differ between studies and because the six studies of foster youth did not include representative samples. For similar reasons, it is also difficult to gauge how the challenges that foster youth faced during the pandemic differed from their pre-pandemic levels. For example, a 2017 STATE study that included a representative sample of 21-year-old foster care alumni reported that 25 % of participants had a positive screen for a mental health disorder (Courtney et al., 2018). This prevalence rate is lower than the percentages of youth who reported mental health concerns in the pandemic-era studies (Greeson et al., 2020; JBAY, 2021; Ruff & Linville, 2021). However, the STATE study used a standardized diagnostic instrument to screen for mental health disorders while the pandemic-era studies used much briefer and less rigorous assessments, which may have contributed to some of the differences in prevalence rates. Thus, while it is difficult to make direct comparisons, studies have shown that the pandemic negatively impacted young adults in areas such as mental health and social isolation (e.g., Hawes et al., 2021). Given the past experiences and challenges circumstances that many foster youth face (e.g., history of trauma, limited family support, disrupted social connections, economic hardships) (e.g., Nadon et al., 2022; Samuels, 2009; Unrau et al., 2008), it is likely that the pandemic had a particularly acute impact on the wellbeing of youth with care histories. The current study builds on these six studies in three important ways. First, it focuses on the specific subpopulation of college-going youth with foster care histories; the six extant studies did not specifically focus on youth who were enrolled in college. Second, it gathers deeper and richer information than previous studies about youths’ firsthand experiences during the pandemic that are described in their own words, providing more context to their experiences. Third, it incorporates the perspectives of CSP administrators and staff about their insights of what it has been like for the hundreds of foster youth in college they have worked with during the pandemic, as well as their reflections on the trials and triumphs of maintaining CSPs during these trying times.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and recruitment

Approval for the current study was obtained from the institutional review board of the first author’s institution. This study aimed to understand how students who were participating in CSPs were adjusting to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as how administrators for those CSPs
were responding to the needs of students during the pandemic. We conducted two sets of focus groups: focus groups with CSP administrators and focus groups with students participating in CSPs. Participants for the CSP administrator focus groups were recruited through three CSP consortium email listservs that reached 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities in California. The recruitment was open to any 2-year and 4-year campus that had an established CSP that served current or former foster youth. All participating CSPs serve students with foster care histories, while some also serve students with other circumstances such as homelessness and unaccompanied status.

Three virtual focus groups with a total of nine administrators from both community colleges (2 groups) and 4-year institutions (1 group) were conducted via Zoom in late October through early November 2020. We then identified four administrator participants to invite students enrolled in their institution’s CSP to participate in the student focus groups. The recruitment of student participants required that they be at least 18 years old, an undergraduate student who is enrolled in a campus support program for foster youth and be a current or former foster youth. We intentionally selected two administrators at community colleges and two administrators at 4-year colleges to ensure that the perspectives of students attending both two-year and four-year institutions were represented in the study. In total, 15 students participated in four focus groups, which were conducted virtually via Zoom in December 2020. All focus groups ranged from 60 to 90 min in duration, and audio recordings were transcribed at the completion of the focus groups.

Administrators were not provided with incentives directly for their participation in a focus group; however, we did offer a $50 gift card for program use to the four administrators who assisted with recruiting student participants. Student participants were all provided with a $25 Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate in the study.

3.2. Data analysis

This study was informed by a mixed method analytic strategy, QUAL + qual (Morse, 2009; Morse & Niehaus, 2009), which allowed for analyzing and comparing data from two distinct but related groups of participants on a certain area of inquiry. The purpose of the study was to understand how CSPs were adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by our research question, data from the focus groups conducted with administrators served as the core component, which meant that these data on their own were sufficient for an independent study. We were interested in their perspectives and experiences given their day-to-day engagement with the program and its participants. However, to enhance our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on CSPs, we included data from focus groups with students who participated in CSPs to serve as a supplemental component (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). By using a QUAL + qual methodology, we included data from student focus groups to illuminate findings from administrator focus groups and deepen our understanding of how the CSPs were impacted by COVID-19 (Morse, 2009). Focus groups/participants who are part of the supplemental component (students) need not be equal in size, but instead are used to complement data from the core component (administrators) and interpreted within the core component data (Morse, 2009). Themes from both focus groups allowed us to create a flexible template to examine, compare, and contrast perspectives and experiences of both administrators and students (Morse & Niehaus, 2009).

All researchers independently reviewed and coded all focus groups for both the administrators and students. The researchers began by reviewing the focus groups conducted with the CSP administrators. Following the review, the researchers convened to develop a preliminary codebook to use in coding the focus groups with administrators. After the focus groups were reviewed and coded, researchers met to discuss meaning units noted in the data to formulate possible codes, subcodes, and themes in the data. Researchers paid close attention to the frequency of topics discussed among participants, how they were described, how participants agreed and disagreed with each other regarding topics, the depth and amount of time topics were discussed, and the emotionality or personalization used by participants when discussing certain topics. These factors, along with the use of examples and stories helped to form a clearer understanding of the themes that emerged in the data. The researchers identified themes by organizing codes, descriptions, and meaning units into a table, and editing through discussion. Once the table was complete, the researchers created a template to begin reviewing and coding focus groups conducted with students participating in CSPs. Researchers made note of meaning units that mapped onto themes from administrator focus groups and also noted when students discussed other topics, emphasized other topics, and/or did not discuss similar topics. Researchers met again several times after coding student focus groups to discuss possible themes and to make decisions about differences and similarities among the two sets of focus groups. Once themes were finalized, researchers began to attach exemplary quotes to illustrate the themes from the focus group data.

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. First, reflexivity was used throughout the course of the research process, with the use of critical dialogue and discussions and shared decision making among research team members. Second, observer triangulation was used with multiple researchers collecting and analyzing the data and offering different areas of expertise and perspective (e.g., experience in CSP administration, student affairs, lived experience). Researchers used active and shared memoing throughout data collection and analysis, and the use of an audit trail to document the steps and decision making of the project (Padgett, 2016).

4. Findings

Two overarching themes emerged from our analyses. The first theme pertains to challenges that participants experienced since the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. Six sub-themes highlight specific areas that students and administrators identified as prominent challenges, including: social connections, academics, technology, financial and basic needs, employment, and mental health. The second theme captures the ways students and administrators responded to these challenges and includes the two sub-themes of using collaborative and creative responses and manifesting resilience. Pseudonyms were created to protect participants’ confidentiality.

4.1. Theme 1: Challenges described by administrators and students

4.1.1. Dis-connection: Breaks in social connections among students, staff, and faculty

It was evident that missed connections pervaded every aspect of students’ experiences and breaks in social connections emerged in all of the other subthemes. CSP administrators acknowledged the changes in the social connections among CSP students and in the social connections they had with students. They were focused on finding ways to foster social connections with students that were as effective as connecting in-person. As one administrator, Adriana, stated, “I’m trying to reconnect, stay connected with the students, but I am not really sure how effective it is.” Administrators discussed how much they had relied on connecting with students when they “dropped in” to the office or came by to use the physical space and administrators and staff could have an impromptu conversation or check-in with students, particularly with new students. For example, Mary Ann noted:

For the new students, I think that’s probably-one of the reasons they’re not connected - because they didn’t get to meet us in person.
Like they didn’t get to build that rapport, that relationship that they do when they first come in and come into your office and feel that feeling of being welcome…[that] you’re supported.

Another administrator Grace worried about the loss of connection because, for the students, the CSP is a “social hub or their home base, as well as their home base for encouragement, and guidance, and support when other systems aren’t as consistent or reliable.”.

Students discussed the convenience of talking with staff through virtual meetings, but also struggled to find the time to schedule a time to talk and felt “checked-out” and burned out with being online so much more. Both students and administrators highlighted the importance of being able to physically see someone in-person and being able to shake their hand or give them a hug. As one administrator, Janice, described, “I think being able to have [students] interact via Zoom was positive for them [but] at the same time that does not equate to being physically together and being able to be that emotional support for them.”.

Students talked about the impact of not having the space to do work and to connect with other students and CSP staff. One student, Rosie, described the CSP’s physical space as “a certain area where we were able to go and get snacks and get like, just hang out right there. And now you can’t do that.”.

Students also acknowledged less connection with the CSPs, but when discussing the impact of missing connections with others, students talked more about a lack of social connections with peers inside and outside of the classroom and its effect on their mental health and academics. For example, many students described the importance of the relationships they had formed with classmates and peers and the role they played in their academic success. Students talked about how they missed being able to process course lectures, readings, and discussion groups with other students, which they viewed as enhancing their learning of the material and concepts. Eric, a student, provided his insights on how students learn from each other:

Traditional learning environments, allow us to interface, not only with just the information that was presented directly to us, but with our classmates...as we dynamically interface with the information we’re able to see like there are gaps in our knowledge that our classmates may have, and they may have gaps in their knowledge, where we can kind of address that...using each other as sound boards facilitates our learning because when we explain something to our classmates is consolidates information. But when we’re sitting at home in front of my computer, I don’t have an opportunity to really like talk to my classmates to be like, “Hey, you know, what, what part of this test didn’t you understand?”

Students also talked about missing opportunities to connect with the faculty, and staff on campus while being remote. Marilesa explained:

Because I’m so used to being in class and being able to talk to multiple people, I’m lucky that I did meet a couple people this quarter. And they’re amazing. Actually, I’m so used to being super close with my professors, going to every office hour, talking to them after class. That’s usually how I am. So now it’s kind of weird having to go to there. Like some of them don’t even have office hours.

4.1.2. Academic disruptions: Enrollment, classes, and learning

Both CSP administrators and students voiced concerns about the pandemic’s impact on student academics, although the administrators tended to focus on inadequate orientation and declining persistence while students focused on their experiences with classes and difficulties with learning. Administrators talked about how their CSP’s orientation had to be severely cut back and had to transition to a virtual event. In addition to beginning to build relationships with students, CSP orientations were used to communicate vital academic information such as how to register for classes and how to talk with professors. As Ivy commented:

So, I noticed like when your students were not ready to approach a faculty member or they didn’t know how to use [the online teaching platform] and every like that until later on when we started reaching and doing those specific workshops…and we noticed that some of them, you know, their grades got impacted.

Administrators noted that in the virtual format, orientation attendance was lower than in past years and the onboarding information that students received was less comprehensive. The CSP administrators were also worried that persistence rates would drop due to employment opportunities, students stopping out of school until in-person learning resumed, and colleges being less flexible with students’ ability to withdraw from classes without it affecting their GPA.

Students focused more on their experiences with taking courses in an online format. Several students found it very challenging to organize their time and responsibilities, particularly for classes that were asynchronous and did not require students to attend a regularly scheduled class meeting. As John reflected,

… with online schooling it’s a lot of freedom. You know, you’re not required to be in class and you kind of just have to manage your time to watch the lecture videos on your own and get your assignments done. So, I think that’s what I struggled with...just too much freedom and a lot of responsibility on myself to teach the material.

Some students talked about how easy it was to fall behind on lectures and assignments, which put them in a position where they had an overwhelming amount of work to catch up on.

Several students complained that they were not learning as much in online courses as they would in person. Jordan said that, “It’s more of your just kind of getting through it, just to get through it looking on the screen and not really understanding what you’re reading.” Another student, Carlos, said online classes involved a lot more self-teaching and it felt like “I was learning from YouTube.” Students talked about how the online courses, especially pre-recorded lectures, made it much harder for them to focus and retain information. Katlyn described her experience with online learning as “information bulimia”, where information is taken in, not truly digested, and thrown back up for an exam. Several students talked about how the lack of social interaction with classmates affected their ability to learn. They talked about how interaction with peers inside and outside of class enabled them to use each other as a sounding board, check their understanding of material, and fill in knowledge gaps. These interactions helped to consolidate their learning. As Katlyn reflected, “I gained so much knowledge from talking with my peers about the information and I really learned from them from what I didn’t learn in lecture.” Students who were enrolled in applied fields such as nursing especially lamented the lack of hands-on experiences they would have received if they were in person, which left them feeling less prepared to enter their career. Eric explained, “The curriculum is not meant to be taught via like tele-teaching and working with simulated patients does not like accurately reflect the dynamic nature of like a patient within like an acute clinical setting.” Some students had strong opinions about the quality of online instruction, stating that some instructors were not prepared to teach online and were not sure if the instructors understood or cared about how difficult it was for students.

4.1.3. Technology woes: Access, navigation, and being “Zoomed out”

CSP administrators highlighted three primary areas of concerns with technology, which were accessing appropriate resources, navigating technology, and being sensitive to the flood of information students were receiving. Administrators’ immediate concern at the onset of the pandemic was ensuring that students had access to the proper technological resources. Adriana said, “I think our first immediate response was trying to get students with the equipment in hand. And so whether that was, laptops, hotspots...” Another administrator noted the technology gap many students with foster care histories experience and the need to show them how to navigate and use the technology platforms
that were required. One student, Jordan, shared, “I’m not tech savvy and it just sucks when a lot of teachers expect you to be tech savvy and you’re like, I don’t know how to do this. So how am I supposed to…you know, it’s just been a lot.” CSP administrators echoed the need to provide students with assistance, teaching students how to access online platforms that were required for class. Mary Ann, agreeing with a fellow CSP administrator Adriana, said that, “…navigating and helping [students] one-on-one on how to use the platforms that the school was using. So, definitely that was one of the biggest challenges.”

Administrators also talked about the information overload and fatigue that students experienced through a deluge of emails and countless hours spent using other technological platforms. In response, administrators tried to be thoughtful and strategic about their communication to students. Mary Ann stated, “They’re getting bombarded, and it is just so much information overload. I could understand because even as professionals, we get information overload right?” Administrators tried to communicate with students in innovative ways through texting, newsletters, social media, virtual meetings, and phone calls. Elizabeth shared her strategy, “I send a newsletter every week, every Monday. Monday newsletter. Here’s what’s coming up. Here’s dates to remember… so we have had some more success with texting. That was a steep learning curve for us because it wasn’t something our program was doing before.” Even with these new strategies, program staff said there was still low response from students. Many administrators agreed that students were just “Zoome out,” as Janice put it, feeling exhausted from spending so much time on the computer and on screen.

Students talked less about the actual challenges with adapting to technology but were more concerned about faculty’s ability to use technology with their teaching. Sharon shared:

I expected there to be more preparation for the professors. So, they can make their classes as well as possible for the students and some professors. One professor that I have, she’s done an amazing job with that. But for another professor, I don’t know if they don’t care. I don’t know if they haven’t been prepared. I don’t know if it’s both. But it’s just the quality isn’t there. It really isn’t. And I think that I was expecting or hoping for more.

Students also had difficulty with compatibility software issues, particularly for specific majors. A nursing student, Asia, stated:

We’re already like done with half of the semester and then we had to start using [an exam administration program] and at the time I did have a Chromebook. And all I could basically do is just withdraw from the class because the exams were so many points and I had already missed a lot.

4.1.4. Basic needs: Gaps and financial hardships

Administrators took a student-focused case management approach in attempting to meet gaps in students’ basic needs. Sasha acknowledged the challenges students experienced across a range of basic needs: “With them having insecure housing, with food insecurities, with financial challenges… it’s been quite trying for our students, especially our foster students that were just really trying to stay focused……” Administrators agreed that they had been working in crisis mode since the start of the pandemic. Elizabeth said, “We are just living at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. We’re just trying to keep people safe and stable and connected so that they can get the resources and support that we’re able to offer.”

Financial hardships and basic-need gaps varied from student to student based on their circumstances, with some stating they were not impacted financially and others experiencing more severe consequences. Kevin shared that he felt homeless students were impacted most, because they used the campus to access showers and food: “I did have a few students that reached out and they’re like, ‘Where can I shower now?’…With the campus closures, you know, those basic resources were cut off.” Most students shared their struggle with access to basic academic tools such as Wi-Fi, computers, or books. Emily described that she lost her hair salon business as a result of the pandemic and were struggling to access unemployment benefits while also struggling to figure out how to pay for books and access a computer for online learning. Ashley expressed frustration that it took one month to get help accessing a hotspot, and even after getting one she struggled to pay for the Wi-Fi: “I’m not going to be able to keep paying $50 every month just for this Wi-Fi. I’m not going to do it… $50 to other people may not seem a lot, but to me it’s a lot. I’m alone and I don’t have any financial help.”

Some students talked less about their individual unmet needs during the pandemic and instead focused on safety and concern for others. Carlos explained why he avoided going out in public: “I wanted to keep myself safe and I also did not want to accidentally give COVID to my land lady.” Rosie shared how she felt stable with housing and had access to a car and food, and used what she considered her abundance to help others:

Like we, we make extra food. A lot of the times, like for holidays, we gave food out to like the people around that live in the homeless areas around me. We try to help out other people, you know, at this point, cause we are, we are like, okay, in certain aspects, you know, but it still doesn’t mean that I don’t need certain type of help, you know?

As a parenting student, her need was in other areas like access to a quiet study space because she had small children at home to care for: “…it’s just like loud, like they’re running around. Like it’s just, you get too distracted.” Other students also lamented the lack of access to physical spaces on campus, both because it was a barrier to their academic focus and social connection.

4.1.5. Employment challenges: Too much or too little

Employment was a challenge for some students and a financial stabilizer for others. Some students experienced a reduction in their work hours. Katlyn shared, “I mean my hours have definitely been affected and my income is definitely not the same. And it’s been really challenging as of recently to get more hours.” Another student, John, shared how the pizza company he worked for decided to cut hours for all employees instead of letting anyone go, and also offered free food to employees, “I will admit, I make a lot less money but I get cheap pizza.” The loss in employment hours from students prompted an increase in emergency funding requests to the CSPs. As Adriana stated at the CSP program she directed, “…when students who were employed started seeing their hours cut… that also prompted a lot of response requests for emergency support. Students didn’t know what that meant long-term for their financial security.”

Other students experienced an opposite effect of the pandemic and had their employers offer extra hours and increased wages. For those students, school and work began pulling them in two different directions. Matt, a CSP administrator, described, “It’s definitely been a tug-o-war where students who, you know, rightfully so, some of them are in need of some extra cash…once they see that they’re making a little bit more money and they’re able to stretch their finances a little bit more, it’s enticing. So now education becomes, you know, second place.” Another administrator spoke of a large national company who recently started paying $20 per hour for working a 3 pm-1am shift and encouraging overtime by offering $25 per hour. The administrator, Sasha, was concerned that academics would be put on the backburner and ultimately suffer: [Students think] Oh, I can do this. Like I can push through. They think that, oh, it’s just online. I’ll just get to it later.” Additionally, administrators began noticing a drop in enrollment and shared a concern that students may not return the following semester. When checking in with students, Alma noticed, “…a lot of them have said that they have withdrawn, because they have to go to work. So, to cover their expenses. Some have to go work full time and are dropping out at the moment because of that.”

Having or maintaining a part-time job was not the only concern for
some students. Some graduating students were not able to complete their practicum hours in-person due to the pandemic and raised concerns about employability after graduation. Some students expressed feeling cheated out of their full college experience by the pandemic. Eric described why he attended his specific college particularly because the nursing program’s reputation for providing a strong clinical practicum:

I chose this nursing program over any other nursing program because I’ve heard that we get a lot of practice and because...the nurses that come from my [2-year college] have the best practical skills and...critical thinking...That’s why we chose this program, and it feels like we’re losing out on opportunities that we were, I guess like not explicitly promised, but, like the tacitly promise through the program.

4.1.6. Toll on mental health: Stressed, depressed, and depleted

Increased mental health difficulties in CSP students was one of the most commonly expressed themes, both by administrators and students. Several CSP administrators noted increased levels of depression and anxiety in their students. As Janice reflected, “A lot of my students deal with anxiety, depression, and that got triggered tremendously, when the transition happened.” One student, Ashley, described the heaviness and crippling effect that depression had on an ability to function each day.

“I’m not going to lie. Sometimes it’ll take me two days to shower...you just go into these modes that you just don’t want to do anything. And when it comes to meals, I would have a lot of difficulty eating as well. I wouldn’t eat or would eat a lot, it was one or the other.”

Another student, Eric, described his experience as death by a thousand cuts; any one source of stress was manageable, but being attacked on many fronts (e.g., school, claustrophobia at home, family stress, work, finances) is what exacerbated mental health difficulties.

There were many sources of anxiety and depression. Several administrators talked about financial instability and insecure housing situations precipitated by the pandemic, such as students being forced to move in with family members with whom they had a conflictual relationship. Social isolation was a major contributor of mental health difficulties. Janice said of the students in her CSP, “I think the loneliness hit for some students that live on campus...they didn’t have anyone that they could physically lean on. And they felt very lonely, and very isolated.” Jordan described the monotony and disconnection of being a student during shelter-in-place orders that forced her to remain in a confined space:

“It was very depressing, very isolating. It kind of felt like there’s nothing to look forward to. Nothing to wake up to, other than wake up, do your school work online, stare at a screen all day. And that’s it.”

When asked about basic needs, Marisela talked about a desire to connect with loved ones as her fundamental need: “I can’t really be with my friends or my family, so um...what my basic needs are like I need to get out like in order for me to feel like sane.” Some students talked about other situations that contributed to their stress, such as dealing with a depressed partner, caring for children, undergoing a gender transition, and concerns about politics and the presidential election. One student who served as a peer mentor described the secondary trauma he experienced from listening to the difficulties and sometimes tragic situations other students were facing, wanting to be supportive but feeling untrained and unprepared to offer constructive support. This student described these experiences feeling like his “cup is empty”, which interfered with his own studies and plans for the semester.

Students who worked or volunteered in health professions expressed an added layer of stress. While many students were concerned about the health of themselves and their loved ones, those who worked in settings where they were in regular contact with COVID-positive individuals were especially worried about becoming infected and possibly infecting family members or housemates. Seeing the devastating effect of the pandemic up close also led them to express frustration with people who denied the reality of the pandemic or refused to follow the mask and social distancing mandates. Eric spoke adamantly about his encounters:

“[W]orking in the hospital and like, having people that I know deny that COVID is a reality is incredibly exhausting because I will not stand for that. So, I find that I have to advocate for the truth...And also, constantly walking around and seeing people not wearing masks, or harassing people who are wearing masks, or just being on the internet and seeing people just spewing lies, is incredibly exhausting.

In addition to adding stress, the pandemic also took away students’ ability to engage in activities they used to manage their mental health. Seeing friends and family, exercising outside, and attending campus and CSP events were some of the things students had to cut out from their day-to-day lives. Some students either did not bother to seek mental health services or discovered that services were limited. Ashley shared her hesitation in seeking mental health services.

But as in a sense, mental health with the [inaudible] and the counselors, I do feel personally, I never tried to do an appointment because I kind of figured like, wow, how are only one or two counselors going to tend to hundreds? I just don’t understand how there’s resources or money for so, many other things. But when it comes to education or when it comes to mental health and things that really matter, there’s never enough resources.

4.2. Responding to challenges

4.2.1. Collaborative and creative responses: Reaching within and reaching out

Despite the multitude of challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, CSP administrators and students talked about ways they adapted by using collaborative and creative approaches to reduce stress and the negative impact of the pandemic and support each other and students. Administrators described various ways in which they relied on and drew on the resources provided by other institutional units (e.g., financial aid, advising, health services, etc.) and community agencies to ensure the needs of students were being met. These partnerships were at times pre-existing, however, new collaborations were established to help “fill in the gaps” where students had needs. Kevin described outreach efforts his CSP undertook to meet needs that emerged during the pandemic:

“We’ve had to find local showers and stuff for students. COVID-19 hit so hard and hit so many people, and a lot of the resources we had were no longer open or they didn’t have the capacity to help out anyone else. So really having to dig deep and what we found useful was if we called a resource and they couldn’t help us, we would ask them, do you know of anyone rather than trying to go off of leads to find new resources.

Administrators had to think on their feet when barriers arose. For example, some campuses offered drive-through pickups where students could obtain supplies, but since many CSP students did not have cars, the administrators sought resources from nonprofit agencies (e.g., meal distribution program) or personally delivered supply packages to students. Administrators recognized that students were struggling in different ways as the pandemic developed and quickly pivoted to using creative solutions to engage students academically, socially, and emotionally. Administrators provided tangible and emotional support to ensure students stayed connected to the institution, to the CSP, and to students and staff. For example, administrators talked about offering gift cards for food and gas, care packages, and emergency financial assistance for rent and other expenses to help ease stressors that might be interfering with their learning. Administrators checked in with students...
to assess their needs and connect them with the support they needed in the community when they were unable to access on-campus resources. Janice describes the work her CSP did to connect students with food and emergency funding:

[For students who could not get to campus], I wouldn’t be able to work with the campus social workers and the [campus food pantry]. And with a fresh basic needs help, we were able to provide students a pantry. They were able to pick up a box once a week. And some of my students were dealing with mental health issues or transportation issues. So I was able to pick up their pantry box and deliver it to their dorm or off campus as much as I could so they also had access to [food] vouchers for organic, fresh, vegetables and fruits, and a variation of food that they could just pick up once a week...Also emergency funding, students are able to apply [for up to] two thousand dollars of emergency funding to help with mental health and basic needs.

Administrators also responded by increasing and expanding their use of technology to check-in and communicate with students (e.g., text, virtual meetings, office hours, social media), and making students aware of available resources and supports, while maintaining program traditions. Students described these outreach efforts as making them feel cared for. One student, Jordan, expressed how helpful this was:

With the staff, they’ve actually been very proactive about reaching out and like trying to make it feel like home away from home, kind of...it makes me look forward to the [virtual meetings]. It’s like oh my gosh, person, I haven’t seen you in forever...And they also have weekly video chats as well...And it’s just nice to communicate with them and to talk with them...Yes, it’s virtual, but you could see them, it’s face-to-face connection from a distance. They do a very good job making you feel kind of welcome.

The collaborative response to the pandemic that CSP administrators described also manifested itself during the focus groups. In fact, during all three administrator focus groups, participants voluntarily shared the names of community programs, local nonprofits, and technology platforms with each other when a need was expressed. For example, one administrator talked about their “virtual front desk in Zoom” that they used to connect with students as a way for students to connect face-to-face with CSP staff in real time in lieu of a physical front desk. At times focus groups were an avenue for administrators to exchange information and resources needed for their CSPs.

Students recognized and were grateful for the support provided by their CSP and their flexibility and availability but talked less about services they received from CSPs. Students talked more about their own efforts to access resources, to connect with other students, and use strategies to manage the challenges associated with the pandemic. For example, students talked about ways to combat burnout, stress, and depression through exercise and connecting with friends and family online. Emily said, “I try to do things like cooking...I have to take care of my physical health.” Similar to the administrator focus groups, some of the student focus groups became a space where students shared information and tips with each other about ways they overcame challenges brought on by the pandemic. For example, one student shared a student messaging app that helped them with classes and homework in a course they were struggling in. Another student shared that, because of her age, it was more challenging for her to access resources with many of the resources being only available for those 25 years or younger. The genuine concern for others, especially for this participant, was expressed during the focus group when another student who works for a community organization that serves foster youth (Emily) offered, “I’ll let you come to our center...if it’s a place you need to study. I got you girl.”.

4.2.2. Resilience

Despite the pandemic-related challenges, administrators and students coped with the pandemic by drawing on their resilience and strengths. One way administrators built resilience on their teams was through compassion and flexibility. CSP administrators also worked hard to create an environment of resilience for students by reaching out to them individually, checking on their needs, and sending encouraging messages. As Matt described, “I think also what helped, at least me, is reaching out to the students and other staff and just letting them know that we’re all in this together.” This act of individually reaching out to students was repeatedly done by many of the CSP administrators to cultivate a culture of care.

Administrators also discussed ways in which they created boundaries to manage their own self-care by taking lunch breaks, taking the weekends off (except for emergencies), talking with other colleagues, demonstrating self-compassion, and partnering with others to problem solve. One administrator, Kevin, shared that students were understanding of his boundaries and students even encouraged him to take care of his own health.

[Y]ou know, it’s kind of hard with the job that we do and the students we serve...What I found is students are super understanding, you know, that I have students and they’ll be like, ‘Have you taken a lunch today?...You can call me back in an hour, like, go take your lunch.’ And I’m like, okay. It’s hard to do sometimes, but those boundaries really helped me maintain my wellbeing.

Students recognized the role of the CSP in their resilience and shared appreciation for staff support, access to resources, and efforts to keep them connected and engaged. As Ashley shared, “[CSP] has tried to provide us with some type of help, and I really appreciate that on their part as a program, because that has definitely helped me with all the extra things that I wasn’t ready for.” Some students who had previous relationships with the CSP staff before the pandemic found that peer interaction was another important resource that contributed to feeling supported. They were able to stay connected with students who understood their unique experience and were an important part of their support system, which is reflected in Renee’s comment: “I’m interacting with people in the [CSP] program. I have a lot of close friends in the [CSP] program. So, I mainly interact with them. We talked through the issues we’ve experienced with online classes and our own personal issues. So, I’d like my friends within the program for [CSP program].”

All of the administrators spoke of the students’ resilience and how they shined through. “Our foster youth students are resilient. They’re courageous and they managed to adapt and continue to push forward”, Matt described. In response to their struggles, students talked about ways they incorporated various activities and practices to maintain their well-being (e.g. positive self-talk, exercising, reaching out to talk to others or therapy, self-compassion, etc). One student (Ashley) shared her examples of self-care:

I read the Bible. ...So, that’s been like a big mental help for me. And besides that, I guess just more exercise, trying to eat better, organizing. I like to clean a lot. I feel like that does a big thing for you...And also candles, that to me is therapeutic and I try to do as much self-care as I can.

5. Discussion and implications

This study builds on the existing research on foster youths’ experiences during the pandemic by giving voice to students and administrators in CSPs. This study has relevance to the hundreds of CSPs serving thousands of college students with foster care backgrounds across the U.S., who were also shaken by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main findings are depicted in a graphic in Fig. 1, which is a model of the challenges to wellbeing that were noted by participants in this study. The inner circles represent the challenges that CSP students and staff experienced and discussed during the focus groups. These challenges are distinguishable but interconnected and complex. For example, increased stress from basic needs gaps and
diminished social connections impact some students’ mental health, which in turn impacts their academics and willingness to connect with others. COVID-19 had a disruptive impact that amplified many of these challenges, and students and staff drew on resilience and creative and collaborative responses to buffer the impact of the pandemic on their wellbeing.

The findings increase our understanding of the experiences students faced during the pandemic and shed light on implications moving forward to support students with foster care histories in higher education. Echoing previous studies about the pandemic’s effect on youth with foster care experience (Greeson et al., 2020; JBAY, 2021), one of the most commonly referenced challenges were issues that students faced with mental health. Some students described this as the accumulation of stressors (e.g., “death by a thousand cuts”) while others talked about more debilitating effects (e.g., being unable to bring oneself to shower). One thing that became apparent through the focus groups is that a vicious circle seemed to be at play, in which social isolation affected students’ mental health, which left them feeling burned out and stressed out, and in turn less likely to socially engage with others when opportunities arose. Mental health and social isolation are concerns that may be particularly important to address for college students with foster care backgrounds. Stemming from past trauma, foster youth have been found to experience mental health challenges such as PTSD and depression at higher rates than their peers (Engler et al., 2022; Havlicek, 2013). Many foster youth also lack family privilege that most college students take for granted (Seita, 2014) and have more tenuous social support systems than their peers due to frequent moves and placement changes (Unrau et al., 2011). The stress and forced isolation that accompanied the pandemic may have hit youth with care histories particularly hard.

One finding that stood out is that students talked about how valuable it was when CSP staff took a proactive approach to reaching out to them, rather than relying on scheduled meeting times or waiting for students to come to them with a problem. Oftentimes these impromptu check-ins were brief (e.g., a 5-minute phone call), but students appreciated them because they communicated care and created a line of connection during an otherwise isolating and disconnected time. In some cases, these check-ins brought up issues to the CSP staff’s attention that they would not have otherwise known about, which allowed them to intervene. Our findings emphasize the importance of CSP staff taking a vigilant and proactive approach to staying connected with students. Doing so may be challenging for CSPs with limited staffing capacity. However, a light-touch approach may be limiting in efforts to adequately support students with foster care histories, especially during times of crisis. This underscores the importance of CSPs being adequately funded and equipped so that staff can engage with students intentionally and caringly.

Our interviews also found that as CSP administrators were aware of the mental health needs of students and became poignantly aware of how important it was to take care of themselves. The added stress of the pandemic brought exigency of self-care to the forefront. The
administrators acknowledged that if they were unable to rest and be healthy, their ability to serve their students would be greatly compromised. Setting healthy boundaries between work and home life and leaning on each other for emotional support were two ways the administrators coped and prevented burnout. Given the high intensity and demands of working in CSPs, an important task for CSP administrators is to build self-care into the work culture. For example, designated time each week can be scheduled for staff to emotionally process and support one another, and administrators can include wellbeing check-ins as part of weekly supervision. Creating a work environment where staff are able to set boundaries and mutually support one another may reduce burnout and ensure students are being adequately served.

It is well documented that a sense of belonging has a positive impact on student retention (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). Students’ social connections and sense of belonging were severely diminished because of the pandemic. And for new students, it thwarted their ability to establish a strong connection with CSP staff and peers that would otherwise form in person. Building a sense of community is the lifeblood of CSPs and for students to trust and build connections. The summer bridge programs, orientations, doing activities together, impromptu visits in the CSP drop-in center starts to build students’ connection to the CSP program. While CSP staff did their best to recreate these activities online the connection to new students was almost nonexistent. Some CSP staff mentioned that they were especially concerned about their ability to establish a meaningful connection with first-year students given that many in-person activities were not an option due to the pandemic. Many CSP staff mention that they made frequent attempts to reach out to first-year students, but were unable to meet with them one-on-one. The staff worried about the first-year student’s wellbeing and their ability to persist due to this lack of connection. Students with previous connections to CSP were able to rely on those relationships for emotional support and to help them cope. These relationships were essentially like a knot at the end of the rope that helped them hang on; first-year students did not have this experience. Creating a strong sense of belonging is difficult to do in a virtual environment. There are benefits to using virtual platforms, such as helping to meet the needs of busy college students (e.g. required program/staff meetings). Using virtual platforms help to ease student’s scheduling and transportation burdens can be a productive strategy. However, whenever possible, it is critical to provide in-person interactions with CSP staff and students to establish and maintain a deeper sense of connection and supports their ability to persist in college.

The pandemic exacerbated gaps in students’ basic needs in various ways. Housing, food, and safety were not the only things that students categorized as basic needs; they also included access to reliable internet, computers, and adequate study spaces, and one student counted connecting with loved ones as fundamental. CSPs had existing ways to help students meet basic needs before the pandemic, however, the pandemic stretched these interventions and approaches and required creativity and collaboration beyond what was previously done. Many campuses collaborated with community organizations like Meal Nation, iFoster, and Together We Rise (TWR) for quicker access to food, technology (hotspots and laptops), and emergency funding for housing. Although CSPs worked diligently to pull together the resources students needed, some students approached the gap in their basic needs through part-time employment. However, for some students, employment became an unbalanced scale as work weighed heavier on their time than did school.

Some students were enticed to work more hours, to work irregular hours, or to work overtime for higher pay, pulling them away from school and the campus resources that come with being a full-time student. CSP staff strongly advised students to stay enrolled, if even part time, so they had access to resources on campus and funding (via financial aid and through the CSP). Throughout our findings it was clear that students from foster care experienced deeper challenges with meeting basic needs beyond food and housing insecurity and had needs that are outside of what college campuses can readily offer. A clear implication for practice for CSPs to consider is the vital importance of expanding and cementing their network of supports for students that face hardships beyond their institution, specifically with nonprofits and community organizations. Nonprofits tend to be faster at connecting students with supports to meet basic needs and more effective in helping with the technical aspects (e.g. applying for CalFresh, accessing technology). Although community partners are critical for CSPs, it is still important for CSPs to build and maintain strong working relationships with campus partners that have resources for students to tap into. Addressing gaps in basic needs security is an especially pressing issue for foster students. In a 2020 study of over 200 colleges and universities in 42 states, students with foster care backgrounds were found to be 37 % more likely than their non-foster peers to have experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness (78 % vs 57 %) (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of the usual practices of CSPs (e.g., being available for drop-in meetings with students), however, it also created an opportunity for CSP administrators and staff to explore innovative strategies they may not have been used otherwise. For example, some CSP administrators experimented with new ways of maintaining regular communication with students without bombarding them with emails, texts, or meetings, such as sending short email blasts with time-sensitive resources and holding meetings that did not have a targeted skill-development or learning objective that allowed students to simply share, vent, and relax in the company of other students and staff. These new strategies allowed for increased flexibility and personalization in meeting the needs of students during a time when students had a variety of needs and restrictions on physical contact and interactions. Going forward, some of these new practices may be useful even after campuses return to in-person. For example, offering the option to hold some advising meetings virtually may be more convenient for students who have work, family responsibilities, or other obligations, or have difficulty getting to campus.

The pandemic forced CSP administrators and staff to acquire new skills and expertise in blending the use of technology and in-person support. This can help increase the reach and versatility of CSPs to engage and connect with students, while also promoting connection between students, which has been shown to be important for students entering postsecondary education settings (Geiger et al., 2017). This flexible approach goes beyond traditional engagement strategies to help students in meeting their basic needs, ensuring mental health stability, and promoting academic success.

Technology continues to change and improve, and the need for technology was especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. CSP administrators and students had to learn and adapt to using new applications and devices, which findings show were challenging for many. The reliance on technology to be able to accomplish many day-to-day life tasks has illuminated a number of issues related to equity and access for students, in particular. For example, many did not have access to reliable wireless internet in their homes or have adequate equipment to access courses online and complete required assignments. Many students recognized the importance of space and privacy for their learning. Administrators at CSPs responded in a way that may have addressed some of their immediate needs, however, the larger issue of equity and access of services and resources related to technology among students may continue to exist even as students return to in-person instruction.

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4 It is interesting to note that collaborations with child welfare caseworkers were not volunteered by student participants or CSP staff. This may be due to some of the students no longer being in foster care, and to the infrequent contact that is required of child welfare caseworker for youth who are in extended foster care (i.e., one visit per month is required). Future studies may consider exploring the collaboration, or lack thereof, between extended foster care providers, CSP staff, and students in CSPs.
5.1. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights on the experiences of CSP staff and students during the pandemic, some limitations are important to note. The students’ experiences captured in this study were from those who were enrolled in school and willing to participate in the study. The study may have missed students who faced extreme challenges and circumstances that led them to drop out of school, to be out of communication with the CSP, or to be unable to or disinterested in participating. Notably, the study recruited few first-year college students. The same difficulties CSP staff had with establishing relationships with first-year students may have played out in our recruitment efforts. CSP administrators were the main point of contact for recruiting students. As it was made clear in the electronic communication that participation was completely voluntary, it is possible that many of the students who participated had a positive relationship with CSP staff and this could have influenced their participation or their perspective of the program. While the interview guide probed multiple areas, we did not systematically collect demographic characteristics of our study participants via survey questions. Finally, our study is geographically limited to CSPs in California, and most of the participating campuses were in the southern part of the state.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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