

**ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION SUCCESS FOR HOMELESS AND FOSTER YOUTH:
SUMMARY OF GAO FINDINGS AND LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS**

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report ([GAO-16-343](#)) documents the challenges and barriers affecting the ability of homeless and foster youth to pursue a college education. Many of the problems documented by the GAO report should be addressed in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act .

GAO FINDING: Limited academic preparation, family support, and awareness of resources make it harder for homeless and foster youth to pursue college. HEA reauthorization should:

- **Address lack of family support by requiring colleges and universities to:**
 - Designate single points of contact to assist homeless and foster youth to access and complete higher education, and communicate the resources and financial aid available; and
 - Develop a plan to assist homeless and foster youth to access housing resources during and between academic terms.
- **Improve awareness of resources by:**
 - Requiring that admissions applications provide youth the opportunity to identify as homeless or foster youth for the purposes of being provided information about financial aid and student support services;
 - Including homeless and foster youth in the data collected by college access programs and requiring that programs identify ways they can further support these students' participation and retention; and
 - Requiring that institutions of higher education disseminate public notice of FAFSA policies for unaccompanied homeless youth and youth in or coming from foster care.
- **Improve academic preparation by** ensuring that college access programs collaborate with child welfare agencies, homeless service providers, and school district homeless liaisons to identify, conduct outreach to, and recruit homeless and foster youth and remove any barriers to access for these youth.

GAO FINDING: Burdensome Program Rules Can Hinder the Ability of Homeless and Foster Youth to Access Federal Supports. HEA reauthorization should:

Addresses burdensome program rules by:

- Clarifying that youth under age 24 who are determined to be unaccompanied and homeless are considered independent students and can get the full financial aid they need;
- Streamlining the FAFSA questions for homeless unaccompanied youth;
- Easing the verification and determination process for homeless unaccompanied youth;
- Clarifying that that "foster care children and youth" include youth who were in foster care at age 13 or older even if they are subsequently in another permanency arrangement, such as adoption or guardianship; and
- Establishing a student loan ombudsman to resolve disputes for unaccompanied homeless youth and youth coming from foster care who are denied independent student status.