

## FIRST STAR UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI ACADEMY

### Foster Youth in Miami

There are over 400,000 foster youth in the United States, and over 3,000 in Miami- Dade County. Once removed from their parents because of abuse or neglect, our society assumes legal responsibility to ensure that all foster youth have the supports needed to successfully transition to adulthood. Unfortunately, these youth experience an average of 8 home and school changes while in foster care. Only half graduate high school and less than three percent earn a college degree. Foster youth age out of care each year unprepared for independence. Instead, within two years of aging out of foster care, more than half are homeless, incarcerated, or on welfare. Each teen who drops out of high school, and becomes involved with drugs or crime, costs society an estimated \$2 million.

### First Star Academies

First Star partners with universities throughout the country to make a long-term investment in foster youth and change the course of their lives, from trauma and instability to academic achievement and self-sufficiency. The Academies include four immersive residential summers on a university campus and monthly sessions during each school year. During the residential sessions, the youth are supported by highly qualified professionals, as well peer mentors attending the host university. Throughout all four years, Academy staff provide holistic case management to the youth and their families to sustain the progress youth make during the university-immersion sessions. First Star, the country's only long-term college prep program for foster youth, shows youth that they belong on a college campus and helps them get there. The University becomes a second home that inspires and supports them.

The First Star Academies currently serve approximately 300 youth across seven campuses: UCLA, University of Connecticut, University of Rhode Island, City University of New York, George Washington University (DC), Rowan University (New Jersey), University of Central Florida, and Loyola University (Chicago). The First Star Academies have significantly improved the outcomes of participating youth across the country. 100% of Academy youth graduate high school, and more than 90% enroll in higher education.

### University of Miami Academy

First Star is now partnering with the University of Miami and Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe to open the First Star University of Miami Academy. The Academy will select 30 rising 9<sup>th</sup> grade foster youth to participate in four years of Academy programming. Ideally, the program will add a new cohort of rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders each year. The School of Education and Human Development and the Law School's Children & Youth Law Clinic are the key UM partners involved in all aspects of design and implementation, however the Academy will leverage resources from multiple disciplines and programs across campus. The Academy's full-time Director will oversee programming and establish and maintain partnerships with key community agencies to ensure all of the youths' needs are met.

### Program Components

The University of Miami Academy will keep youth on track for high school graduation, and prepare them for higher education and adulthood, by providing specialized programming that address: (1) academics; (2) life skills; and (3) adult supports.

#### *Academic Supports*

Foster youth have the poorest education outcomes in the country because of school instability and unaddressed special education needs. By third grade, more than 80% are retained, and some studies estimate that by eleventh grade, less than 20 percent are proficient in Reading Comprehension, Language Arts or Math. Only half of foster youth ever graduate high school, and only three percent earn a college degree.

The University of Miami Academy will reverse these trends through targeted academic instruction and education advocacy. During the Summer Academies and monthly sessions, English and Math instructors will teach the youth grade-specific content and provide remedial supports as needed. These instructors will also provide SAT/ACT prep to ensure the youth are competitive during the college admissions process. All youth participating in the program will also be assigned an education advocate who will review their school records, track their progress towards high school graduation, and identify and secure any

supports needed to succeed in school. The education advocates will work with the youths' caregivers, social workers, attorneys, and schools to develop an academic plan for high school graduation and admissions to higher education.

### *Life Skills*

Foster youth often lack the skills needed to successfully transition into adulthood. At age 18, they are often expected to independently manage their education, employment, housing, healthcare, and finances without the support of other adults. The Academy will develop a life skills workshop curriculum to ensure the youth are prepared for adulthood. Workshops will focus on psycho-social and self-efficacy skills, and also include topics such as higher education, budgeting, nutrition, healthy relationships, and substance abuse.

In addition, participating youth will be trained on their rights as foster youth and given self-advocacy skills. The Academy will work with the local courts to secure necessary permissions to allow participating youth to identify themselves as foster youth and share their experiences. Youth will be given opportunities to create videos and blogs that will inform policymakers of the needs of foster youth.

### *Adult Supports*

Too often foster youth repeatedly move placements and exit foster care without any family or permanent adult supports. The University of Miami Academy will work with attorneys and social workers to advocate for youth to be in appropriate foster homes, and then engage caregivers to ensure they have the supports needed to keep youth in their homes and support youth academically. Where appropriate, biological parents are engaged and supported to help with the reunification process. In addition, by working with local partners, the Academy will identify and train adult mentors who will provide additional support to the youth as they transition into higher education. The goal of these efforts is to ensure that youth transition into adulthood with strong relationships with adults who can provide ongoing and continued support.