

2015

# Investing in Haiti's Future: CUNY's Partnership for Student Success

Ashleigh B. Thompson  
*City University of New York*

Cidna R. Valentin  
*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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### Recommended Citation

Thompson, Ashleigh B. and Valentin, Cidna R., "Investing in Haiti's Future: CUNY's Partnership for Student Success" (2015). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/oa\\_pubs/11](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/oa_pubs/11)

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## **Investing in Haiti's Future: CUNY's Partnership for Student Success**

### *Excerpt from field-notes, Montrouis, Haiti*

*During a Friday afternoon session, our CUNY team met with 18 Haitian Kennedy Fellows from three public, regional universities: UPNCH (University of the North at Cap Haitien), UPSAC (University of the South at Aux Cayes) and UPAG (University of the Artibonite at Gonaives). I started my translated comments about the Kennedy Fellows program by showing a picture of JFK on my laptop and asking the group if they knew who he was ....I told them that President Kennedy's time in office was signaled by a sense of optimism and hope. His family is known for their commitment to public service. After JFK was assassinated his two children, Caroline and John, Jr., carried on his commitment to public service. When John, Jr. became an adult, he decided that his contribution to public service would be helping people go to college. That was the beginning of the Kennedy Fellows Program.*

*I explained that to win most awards, you have to do something extraordinary. But the Kennedy Fellows program invests in young leaders who may be struggling but exhibit tremendous potential; the Program is based on the knowledge that Fellows will go on to do great things. It's not only what they do, but who the Fellows are, that is important.*

*The Kennedy Fellows Program is the oldest program in our JFK, Jr. Institute. In more than 20 years, the Program has worked with over 800 Fellows. I shared the 'Once a Kennedy Fellow, Always a Kennedy Fellow' adage with the Fellows, and also told them that even though they represent their colleges, they also represent the Program and program staff, and we are honored to know them.*

-- June 2012

## **The Chancellor's Initiative in Haiti**

The City University of New York (CUNY), the leading urban public university in the nation, consists of 24 colleges and professional schools and serves more than 270,000 degree-credit students annually. More than 6,000 students of Haitian descent enroll each year; the CUNY community also includes tens of thousands of alumni, faculty and staff of Haitian descent. After the 2010 earthquake CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein recruited CUNY faculty and staff to lead a university-wide effort to support the people and institutions of Haiti. A CUNY-wide Advisory Group was convened and began meeting with Haitian educators and government officials. Partners agreed that CUNY would initially support the development and consolidation of Haiti's public university network in the regions including the Public University in the South in Les Cayes (UPSAC), the Public University in the North at Cap-Haitien (UPNCH) and the Public University in Artibonite at Gonaives (UPAG). The targeting of regional institutions outside of Port au Prince is consistent with recommendations that emphasize decentralizing higher education, promoting greater access, broadening workforce development opportunities and strengthening regional economies.

In March 2011 the rectors of UPSAC, UPNCH and UPAG visited CUNY and met with Chancellor Goldstein, CUNY college presidents and other colleagues to set goals and agree upon the direction of the initiative. This chapter describes one strand of this work, a scholarship and career mentoring program for exemplary students in partner universities in Haiti.

## **History of the Kennedy Fellows Program in the U.S.**

In 1989, John F. Kennedy, Jr. was challenged by his aunt, Mrs. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, to make a contribution to the developmental disabilities field. He met with experts, self-advocates, parents and professionals throughout New York, where he lived, and learned about the chronic workforce crisis that was frustrating efforts to provide a better quality of life for people with disabilities and their families. Staff turnover caused by low wages, minimal benefits, poor training, and lack of career opportunities hindered non-profit service organizations.

John came to believe that an experienced, educated, and motivated workforce was an important factor in meeting the needs of his fellow New Yorkers with disabilities. He understood that the hardworking women and men of this workforce needed to believe they could get ahead

and advance in their careers. To address these issues, John founded *Reaching Up, Inc.*, a non-profit organization focused on promoting access to higher education and helping participants achieve the economic, social and personal benefits associated with going to college. An initial step was to situate *Reaching Up, Inc.* within the City University of New York (CUNY) so that its work could be institutionalized within the nation's leading urban, public University which shared the mission of access and represented a natural partner for operationalizing this work.

In 1989 John F. Kennedy, Jr. established the Kennedy Fellows Program at CUNY, which provides scholarships and career mentoring to frontline workers in the health, education, and human service fields who are attending college. Six years later Bill Clinton appointed John to The President's Committee on Mental Retardation (PCMR); John used the forum of this committee to draw national attention to the workforce crisis in the developmental disabilities field. With the PCMR, he co-founded the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals, a national network of organizations that provides technical assistance to states in implementing worker education programs and creating career ladders for qualified staff. He also noted the contributions of paraprofessionals employed in public schools who represent a valuable source of new teachers, especially in shortage areas such as special education. Having seen the successes of the Kennedy Fellows, he knew that these mature individuals bring extensive experience and knowledge of the community into the professional ranks.

On an international level, John was interested in the ways that political, cultural, economic, legal, and social factors influence the development of health and human service delivery systems. Through *Reaching Up*, he developed Citizen Exchange Programs involving professionals, frontline staff, and disability advocates in the U.S. and their counterparts in Vietnam, Jamaica, and Ireland.

Upon John's death in 1999, his colleagues and friends were determined to carry on his work. His ten years of leadership in building *Reaching Up* provided a foundation for future work at CUNY, and the memory of his enthusiasm and commitment served as an inspiration. The JFK, Jr. Institute was officially named and in 2007 it was integrated into the Office of the University Dean for Health and Human Services at CUNY. In 2015 it moved to CUNY's School of Professional Studies.

In the 25 years since the Kennedy Fellows Program was founded, more than 800 Fellows have been accepted into the program, which has maintained a consistent format. In this program

model, Fellows enroll in college to pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees in such fields as special education, psychology, social work, or nursing, while working in the education, health, or human services fields. Fellows receive modest stipends for college-related expenses each semester, for up to four semesters, as well as tutoring and professional development opportunities. A central focus of the program, however, is career mentoring. Under the guidance of program staff, Fellows are encouraged to select a mentor -- typically a professional in the Fellow's field -- who serves as a role model, career sponsor, and academic advisor. Through the ongoing one-to-one mentoring relationship, and supportive peer relationships with other Kennedy Fellows, dedicated workers receive encouragement and guidance to help them reach their academic and professional goals.

After graduation, Fellows have become social workers, teachers, nurses, clinicians, and administrators at non-profit organizations and public agencies throughout New York. They serve in leadership roles in a diversified workforce and have emerged as role models for their co-workers and strong advocates for the people they serve. In a 2012 survey of Kennedy Fellows, 92% of undergraduate students and 97% of graduate students had completed their degrees or were still enrolled (Shockley and Sullivan-Hewitt, 2013). This high retention rate, far higher than CUNY averages, signals the beneficial impact of the program on its participants. While these data serve as important markers of program success, the Fellows' personal stories of growth and the impact of their educational attainment on themselves and their families comprised the central reason for maintaining the program. John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s original vision of helping participants achieve the economic, social and personal benefits associated with going to college bore out year after year through participant testimonials.

## **Adapting the Program for Haiti**

### *Program Development and Selection of Students*

The Kennedy Fellows Program, whose core value is the importance of investing in individuals, has historically constituted the programmatic heart of CUNY's JFK, Jr. Institute. The University Dean for Human Health and Services was committed to bringing the Kennedy Fellows' scholarship program to Haiti as part of CUNY's initiative in the country. Within the context of billions of dollars of aid coming into Haiti, a program providing concrete assistance in the form of tuition dollars for students' degree completion seemed symbolically meaningful and pragmatically tangible.

The overall goal of the Kennedy Fellows Program in Haiti is to support the academic advancement of exemplary students at the Regional Public Universities (UPRs). While fidelity to the Kennedy Fellows model was taken into account, consideration of national differences in employment rates and workforce development models led to the determination that eligibility for the Haitian Kennedy Fellows Program would not be limited to working adults. Two main eligibility criteria were outlined by CUNY: First, applicants should be full-time students making good academic progress with a proven track record of success. As such, first-year students would not be eligible to apply. Second, selections of Kennedy Fellows should be competitive and based on merit. Diversity should be encouraged in terms of personal background, academic interests, and gender.

Application templates in French, based on the CUNY application, were provided to Rectors for editing. The aim was to develop one common application for all three of the UPRs to use. The UPRs ultimately developed guidelines for selection: faculty juries would make nominations based on criteria including academic merit, gender equity, third-year standing in a licensing program, demonstrated social commitment, economic need, a clean disciplinary record, regular payment of school fees, and submission of a letter of interest.

Stipends in the amount of \$500 would be directed to the campuses; each semester, these colleges would direct the funds to students to use at their discretion. Private funding was provided for this initiative through *Reaching Up, Inc.* The mechanics of payment varied by college; for example, some colleges directed the balance of funds to students as stipends after tuition balances

were paid. Participating colleges also received a modest amount of funding from *Reaching Up, Inc.* to administer the program.

The first cohort of Kennedy Fellowships were awarded in Academic Year 2011-2012 to 18 students, six each at Université Publique du Sud, Aux Cayes (UPSAC), Université Publique du Nord, Cap Haitien (UPNCH), and Université Publique de l'Artibonite, Gonaives (UPAG). In Academic Year 2012-2013, Fellows still enrolled in college received continuation funding. Université Publique du Sudest a Jacmel (UPSEJ) was added to the program and UPAG did not award new Fellows. UPNCH and UPSAC each awarded five Fellows, and UPSEJ awarded six, using supplemental funds from their own campus so that students from all academic departments could be represented among the group of Fellows.

The 34 Fellows represented the disciplines of Tourism and Culinary Arts, Agronomy, Business, Education, Law, and Nursing, with some students specializing in educational psychology, local government, accounting, management, and civil and marital law. Demographically, students were equally male and female and on average in their mid-twenties. Most students were from the local communities surrounding the universities, with the exception of one student who relocated five hours away from her native province in order to attend college.

#### *Annual Conferences*

In addition to receiving financial support for their educational expenses, students participated in annual conferences hosted by the UPRs, the Haitian Ministry of Education, and CUNY. In June 2012, the Program held the first three-day weekend conference in Montrouis, Haiti, about an hour northwest of Port-au-Prince. Attended by Fellows, university administrators, Ministry of Education officials, and CUNY representatives, all attendees became better acquainted with the Fellows and learned more about the internal complexities and challenges of Haiti's public university system. Discussions on the status of the regional public universities and the distinct needs of UPR students, faculty, and administration were also held. The event made apparent the importance of fostering connection among Fellows from different regions of the country. This was the first time that many of the students had left their hometowns, and they appreciated the opportunity to meet students from other cities and to learn more about their country. In a small ceremony at the conclusion of the conference, Fellows were presented with the same Kennedy Fellows insignia lapel pins that CUNY Fellows receive, as a gesture of recognition and unity.

Since the first conference in June 2012, two more annual conferences have been held. Each gathering has become more student-oriented and focused on the Fellows' academic needs.

The August 2013 conference was held in the southern city of Jacmel, one of Haiti's largest cities and historically known for its cultural arts. Based on Fellows' feedback from the previous year's conference, CUNY and UPR faculty facilitated sessions on research methods, post-graduate study, employability, and thesis development over the course of two days. During these sessions, students identified barriers to completing theses and meeting other graduation requirements, such as a lack of advisement for thesis projects, lack of access to information such as books and online databases, and inadequate preparation for state exams.

The conference also offered cultural opportunities to the Fellows. The President of UPSEJ introduced students to Jacmel's rich history and led them on a tour of the city. Students reported that the highlight of the tour was meeting celebrated Haitian poet, Emile Célestin Mègie, whose significant contributions to Haitian Kreyol orthography (Batrville, 2014) are studied in Haitian schools. Students stood in awe of the 91 year-old blind patriarch as he welcomed them into his home.

The conference of June 2014, held in Cap-Haïtien, marked the third anniversary of the annual gathering of Kennedy Fellows. The goal of this conference was to continue fostering relationships and building networks among students, university rectors and deans, and CUNY Haitian faculty. In previous discussions with the Fellows, the critical need for mentorship was identified. Thus, an additional objective for the 2014 conference was to pair students with CUNY Haitian American faculty mentors who would assist students with their theses. Students attended sessions on effective mentoring and participated in interactive sessions with their individual mentors.

A service-learning project was also added to the 2014 program, with the 11 UPNCH Fellows teaming up with CUNY undergraduate nursing students for a day of service with a local community-based organization. The rationale for incorporating such a project into the program drew from the original program model's dedication to service. Additionally, CUNY conference organizers sought to encourage civic engagement and volunteerism among Fellows, as both behaviors have been linked to positive youth development (McBride, Johnson, Olate, & O'Hara, 2011). The Fellows' had also previously expressed interest in these activities.

To stimulate student-involvement and enthusiasm for the project, UPNCH students helped plan the day and visit the site before the arrival of the CUNY delegation. On the day of the project, UPNCH Fellows and CUNY students met the community leaders, engaged in a group activity with teachers and young students of an early childhood program, and planted mangoes, cashews, and other crops at a local farm affiliated with the organization. At the request of the organization, a Tourism and Culinary Arts Fellow conducted a workshop on dining etiquette for community members working in food services. The project provided UPNCH Fellows with a meaningful and educational experience in their community. Fellows also expanded their network and awareness of available local resources. The UPNCH Fellows, who had formed an English Club in the past year, also seized the opportunity to practice English with CUNY students who in return were eager to practice Kreyol.

Similar to the Jacmel conference, a city tour was included in the program. Fellows climbed the mountain leading up to the UNESCO World Heritage Site *La Citadelle Laferrière*, the fortress completed in 1820 by Haitian revolutionary and self-proclaimed king, Henri Christophe. Students were proud to discover the accomplishments of their ancestors and eagerly returned to their families and friends sharing plenty of pictures and stories.

Overall, the annual conferences served as a vital component of the program, offering Fellows important tools for achieving academic and personal success. The conferences also served as a very rare opportunity for Fellows to exchange ideas with their university administrators; these are just two examples of the many effects of the program.

#### *Data on the Impact of the Haitian Kennedy Fellows Program*

Fellows' feedback was essential to the development of the program. Their views on the conferences, implementation process, and other aspects of the program were collected, formally and informally. Through conference evaluation forms, Fellows repeatedly informed CUNY program staff that connecting with other Kennedy Fellows was the greatest benefit of participating in the program. More specifically, 65% of students reported that meeting other Haitian Kennedy Fellows was their primary motivation for attending the second annual conference.

Fellows reported that since becoming a Fellow they have become more community-oriented and have felt an increased sense of responsibility for the future of the UPRs. During focus group interviews in Haiti, Fellows frequently referred to themselves as “students of excellence.” They explained that this facet of their identity, being a Kennedy Fellow, suggested to other students

a special status that they are very proud to hold. One Fellow remarked, “This program has reinforced my motivation, knowing that the students of excellence have a certain privilege. This perception forces me to work harder and aim higher.” They have emerged more confidently as leaders and role models in their campus communities.

The motivation to build and lead community was not limited to the Fellows’ respective campuses. Findings from a 2013 survey of Fellows revealed that the majority of Fellows, across campuses, maintained communication with each other between conference gatherings through telephone and Facebook. Seventy-one percent of students indicated that the Fellows were a major source of support for them personally and academically. Nearly half reported that they shared resources, such as articles and books, with each other.

Fellows reported that the financial support from the program was used for more than tuition. Seventy-one percent of Fellows purchased schoolbooks with their stipend, with 66% using some of the funds for computer supplies and Internet devices, such as flash drives and portable sticks. A substantial number of Fellows (40%) reported using their money to pay for transportation, educational fees (English courses), or to support the education of other family members. Essentially, the funding supported multiple aspects of the Fellows’ education and assisted their families.

From the perspectives of the UPR rectors, the program encouraged partnership among the administrators across the universities. The university rectors collaborated closely to adapt and implement the program at each of their campuses, which many felt was momentous. The program afforded rectors the opportunity to recognize high-achieving students whose talents and potential contributions to the universities might otherwise have been underappreciated or completely overlooked.

### *Gender, Language and the Academic Environment*

Several insights surfaced in the beginning of this project, as a result of the dynamics of perspective and expectations. At the 2012 Montrouis Conference, the first meeting at which the Kennedy Fellows were convened, the Fellows’ 90-minute session was facilitated by several CUNY staff who were American and Haitian-American, Kreyol and non-Kreyol speaking; all had

attended college in the U.S. These attributes influenced both their perceptions and how they themselves were perceived; staff acknowledged their positionality.

Advance planning led the team to consider some stereotypes about university life in Haiti as compared to the United States. Several examples, excerpted from authors' field-notes, illustrate new understanding in the subjects of gender, language, and academic behavior as a result of personal interactions with the Fellows themselves. These issues were challenging to operationalize.

Historically, women in Haiti have struggled against sexism within many spheres of society (Charles, 1995), not excluding the educational sector. In classrooms, as well as observed at these conferences, male students have more voice and power socially than female students. To contend with this issue, the opening icebreaker activity for the Fellows' session at the 2012 conference included mixed gender pairs, though the male pairs went first and led most of the remarks. The female students interjected comments at the encouragement of the group facilitators. During the discussion, the team learned that the dynamics related to sex and gender appear to affect both female and male students. One male student explained to the group that he almost didn't major in Nursing because of gender-based teasing from his friends, though he asserted that this had made him more determined to stay with his choice.

French is privileged over Kreyol, despite disparate levels of comprehension (Zephir, 2012). Lecture is the dominant pedagogy (Doucet & HERNs-Marcelin, 2011), discouraging student participation and unique contributions to the mastery of course topics. To begin to proactively address this stereotype, the CUNY team requested a separate break-out room for the Fellows-only session in order to encourage dialogue, and to create group activities that would enable everyone to speak and interact. They scheduled a new activity every 20 minutes to model dynamic pedagogy, and planned to conduct the workshop in Kreyol. Up until the point of the Fellows' session at the conference, the conference agenda and speeches had been entirely in French. The students listened during plenary sessions but did not ask questions.

During the Fellows' session, a Haitian researcher read aloud the French-language handout on student responsibility that was contained in the Fellows' conference folders. There was no dialogue at the conclusion of the reading; the students sat through it respectfully. Fascinatingly, students observed the same practice within their group discussions with each other. Rather than conversing or interacting, they took turns presenting their circumstances as monologues or mini-

lectures to each other. The male students spoke, one after another. Beginning their introductions in French, they eventually flowed naturally into Kreyol.

Students moved into another facilitated activity that solicited their views on the barriers they faced in college. For some of the Fellows, the pursuit of higher education on the promise of more opportunities through advanced education was thwarted by environmental crises, the centralization of educational opportunities in Port-au-Prince (INURED, 2010), and general political unrest. Prior to enrolling at a UPR, one student completed all coursework at a university in Port-au-Prince only to have all records of her accomplishments lost during the earthquake. Another student began anew by herself at a campus in Haiti's northwest after being denied admission to the nursing program in her hometown in the south. Protests against the government, against the universities, or against individual local leaders are all frequent occurrences, often stalling courses and consequently students' progress in school.

Fellows' also reported on the structural barriers in college. They said that it is difficult to get into college, that professors may not show up for class even though students travel great distances to get there, or that students themselves have to miss class in order to work and earn money. A scarcity of professors can mean that a student waits for hours -- even between classes at 7 am and 7 pm -- on a campus that lacks a food hall and a functioning computer lab. Another male student discussed his fears of spending time and money on college, then being unable to find a job after graduation; he also mentioned the pressure to 'become something' after his parents made sacrifices so he could attend college. A female student added that after spending money on transportation to get to school, she usually doesn't have money for food. Other female students continued to share examples of struggles and success. These themes resonated with facilitators as similar to the sacrifices many CUNY students face to obtain higher education.

At the 2013 Jacmel conference, CUNY facilitators again created an interactive, small group session on pursuing graduate studies abroad. Although designed to solicit their ideas and reactions, the format of the session did not resonate with students, who this time spoke up, expressing that the CUNY team appeared unprepared. To the Haitian students, being prepared for a proper presentation meant delivering a lecture. Both in 2012 and 2013, facilitators had assumed that students would respond positively to a more fluid and less structured style: thus, they did not provide a pedagogic context ahead of time, or explain to students that facilitating interactive discussions is a valid teaching tool in the United States.

Despite attentiveness to the longstanding issues surrounding gender, language, and the environment of higher education in Haiti, the CUNY team was at times unsure about its success in creating a safe, democratic space with equitable participation. Yet, the potential disconnects on expectations did not prevent students from fully engaging and participating in these conferences; they seemed to negotiate scenarios, exchanges and languages with ease. In CUNY's reflections on differences of perspective and positionality —language, education, wealth, Diaspora, gender, power — greater meaning derived from the personal than the micropolitical, a lesson serving as an important guidepost for future meetings with the Haitian Kennedy Fellows. Both at the onset and at the end of the program, human capital remained a cornerstone. John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s original vision of investing in individuals to support them in pursuing higher education and its benefits translated into a vibrant, cultural interaction that broadened the participants involved.

### **Haitian Kennedy Fellows Today and Hopes for Tomorrow**

The Kennedy Fellows program in Haiti demonstrated that the program model is replicable across borders and cultural contexts, both in its format and impact. However, the central, underlying value of the program -- a belief in the importance of investing in human capital -- led to the most important insights about the Fellows in Haiti.

Like their American counterparts, the students of the Haitian Kennedy Fellows Program applied for the program already possessing ample leadership skills. They continue to demonstrate their strong capacity for great contributions to their campus and local communities. In their professional pursuits, they are the first to be selected for high level positions. In professional competitions, they often outrank other candidates. They perform the highest on national exams; for example, one student was the laureate of the national nursing exam. Many are senior leaders in their religious organizations and are active in the transmission of knowledge through these affiliations. They lead teams of community health workers in rural areas. They organize professional associations to promote their fields of study and services in their hometowns. Some participate in daily radio broadcasts disseminating information on Haitian culture, politics, and current affairs. At home, a couple are parents and a few are spouses. Several are the first to attend college among many siblings and are sought after by their relatives as experts and advisors. Most

impressively, many are matriculating in other degree programs at other universities while simultaneously completing their studies at the UPRs.

While it is clear that the students have benefited tremendously from the multiple advantages offered through the program, it is also certain that the students were “rock stars” from the beginning. With a myriad of personal and systemic problems, the students have persevered and with enormous fortitude have steadfastly pursued their paths to success. Their incredible aptitude for high achievement forecasted accomplishments that would have been made even without the program. An aim of the program was to facilitate the often frustrating experience of climbing the educational ladder in Haiti. For many involved in Haiti, the dysfunction of the systems can generate resignation and helplessness. Yet, with confidence and enthusiasm, students frequently utilized their new peer network and the space of the annual gatherings to discuss their thoughtful solutions to the many problems they witness, engendering optimism about the future of higher education in Haiti. At the end of their academic journeys, it is hoped that the Kennedy Fellows in Haiti emerge as beacons of transformation and progress.

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