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# The importance of engaging students on public assistance: New insights and recommendations for practice

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## Abstract

Student engagement in institutions of higher education has become a central priority for educators and administrators. What “student engagement” means for a diverse student body is an important question for public institutions with justice-related missions. As social welfare policy shifts to allow more recipients of public assistance access to higher education, research regarding their engagement experiences remains scarce. To support a socioeconomically diverse student body, consistent with the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) standards, this project explores the nature of engagement among student recipients of public assistance by asking the following research questions: what forms of engagement with students on public assistance take place? Why is engaging students on public assistance important? How can we foster greater engagement with students on public assistance? To answer these questions, student and faculty focus groups are conducted. From this analysis, we highlight normative implications of engaging a socioeconomically diverse student population and present recommendations for fostering greater engagement.

## Keywords

Student engagement, engagement models, socioeconomic disparities, social equity

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## **Introduction**

Since the emergence of a formal theory of engagement in the mid-1980s, student engagement has increasingly become a buzzword at institutions of higher education. This is largely due to the strong link between student engagement and positive academic outcomes (Astin, 1984). More and more, questions emerge about how best to engage diverse student populations. Moreover, academic programming is often mandated to promote diverse engagement, such as by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA, 2014) accreditation standards which encourage accessibility to an economically diverse student population. Attempts to understand engagement with a diverse student body often focus on common “non-traditional” student groups, such as students of color, first generation students, or adult learners. However, as shifts in welfare policy grant greater access to higher education for recipients of public assistance, socioeconomic diversity has emerged as an important facet of diverse student engagement. In order to better understand the perspectives of student welfare recipients on student engagement, this project will use a focus group format to study the experiences of student participants in City University of New York: Educate, Develop, Graduate, Empower, known as CUNY EDGE, a support program for student recipients of public assistance at John Jay College, CUNY.

The Human Resource Administration’s approval of baccalaureate degrees was a large and significant policy shift. New York City is the only area in New York state that allows clients to count these degrees as a work activity. Under Mayor DeBlasio, the Human Resource Administration has been supportive of education and training – including college. However, students enrolled in four-year degree programs who are also recipients of public assistance are rarely studied and often overlooked, in part because they themselves are a relative rarity. Out of the roughly 200,000 public assistance cases that are open in New York City at any given time, only about 3000 cases document any kind of educational activity as a part of their work requirement (New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Bureau of Data Management and Analysis, 2016). Those enrolled in four-year degree programs are likely even scarcer, as the pursuit of a bachelor’s degree did not so much as merit its own subsection among listed educational activities on a 2016 statistical report, and was only approved as a work activity in New York City in 2014. This is often attributed in part to the emphasis on traditional work activities by the Human Resources Administration, who oversees public assistance activities in New York City. However, it may also be linked to low feelings of student engagement among student public assistance recipients and subsequently low rates of retention<sup>1</sup> from year to year. Because of the low visibility of these students, little emphasis is put on fostering their retention, which in turn may cause their numbers to dwindle.

In addition to low awareness of their presence on campuses, student welfare recipients often represent demographics that statistically report lower student engagement and retention rates (Terenzini et al., 2001). This project’s sample, student welfare recipients at the College, are exclusively commuter students. They are also predominantly of non-traditional college age, with a quarter reporting that they are over the age of 25, and most

often first-generation college students. Nearly half are parents or caregivers, and 16% report that they hold part-time employment in addition to attending school. Additionally, the majority are of color, with over 70% of students identifying as Black or Latino (CUNY EDGE, 2017).

In order to meet NASPAA accreditation standards, specifically around student diversity and support, scholastic programs should work to be aware of, and provide appropriate services for, students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. John Jay College, the large, urban, commuter campus where this study was conducted, is accustomed to offering services and engagement opportunities to students who fall outside the parameters of the “traditional” college student. As a Hispanic Serving Institution, it is also familiar with initiatives to engage low-income, first generation, Latino students. However, as one of CUNY’s more rigorous senior colleges, stigma remains surrounding socioeconomic status and the receipt of public assistance. When speaking about their experiences on campus, student welfare recipients often reported negative interactions with faculty after revealing their status as welfare recipients, and a fear of being “outed” to faculty or classmates (Simpkins, 2016). This is representative of campuses across the country, where students may experience just as much, if not more, stigma related to socioeconomic status. Due to this lingering stigma and fear on the part of student welfare recipients, the needs for change and support is evident when it comes to engaging and retaining student welfare recipients.

This study aims to offer recommendations for faculty to foster a sense of belonging among student public assistance recipients by learning more about their experiences and the role that student engagement plays. The following research questions guide our analysis: What forms of engagement with students on public assistance take place? Why is engaging students on public assistance important? How can we foster greater engagement with students on public assistance? To answer these questions, we target CUNY EDGE students and faculty at John Jay College, CUNY, as our sample population. To anchor our research in a shared understanding of student engagement, we use the following definition: an informal, non-required, reciprocal relationship among CUNY EDGE students and other members of the College community that contributes to achieving the larger CUNY EDGE goals. This research presents a greater understanding of what engagement looks like among students on public assistance, why it is important to them, and how it can be enhanced. These findings inform programming to engage students on public assistance and the larger academic community – these results are informative for considering means of promoting greater engagement of students on public assistance in other college and university settings.

## **CUNY EDGE background**

The mission of the CUNY EDGE program at John Jay College is to help students who are receiving public assistance achieve academic excellence, graduate on time, and enjoy career success. This system of integrated, intrusive advising is a best-practice approach (Backhus, 1989) to serving students who are at risk of attrition, particularly those at the mercy of two independent, yet also interdependent, systems: welfare and higher

education. As a result of federal welfare policy, college students who receive cash assistance must document as many as 35 hours per week of “work-related activity.” In New York State, this includes work, internships, classroom instruction, tutoring, or homework. The CUNY EDGE program not only helps students document their activities each week, it also gives them the tools necessary to excel while meeting the demands of the college and the New York City Human Resources Administration. CUNY EDGE is a University Program spread across 19 campuses. At John Jay College, the program is housed within the Center for Career and Professional Development in the Division of Student Affairs. The CUNY EDGE program has proven itself an effective student engagement initiative that improves academic, personal, and career outcomes for non-traditional college students.

In 2017, CUNY EDGE at the College conducted an internal demographic analysis and assessment for the Division of Student Affairs. Based on the data compilation, the program served 186 students. Our students identify with multiple nontraditional indicators; 100% report that they live off campus and commute, 48% report that they are parents and/or primary caregivers, 28% report that they are over the age of 25, and 55% were transfer students. In addition, CUNY EDGE students face significant socio-economic disparities; 100% of our students have a gross income of under \$22,311.00, (based on New York State income eligibility for Public Assistance), and 16% report that they maintain part time employment while pursuing their bachelor degree. CUNY EDGE students at John Jay have diverse demographics with 44% identifying as Latinx, 27% as Black or African American, 7% as Caucasian, 3.7% as two or more races, 1.6% as Asian / Pacific Islander and 1% as Middle Eastern (CUNY EDGE, 2017).

The services provided through CUNY EDGE include attendance monitoring, academic advising, personal counseling, career coaching, a life skills curriculum, a group for first-of-the-family students, and advocacy with local government agencies. These resources, when combined with resources like childcare, transportation, and food benefits, can level the playing field for students with the most financial need on our campus. While the student needs are vast, CUNY EDGE at the College has remarkable success with student engagement. The campus was projected to serve 131 students; by the end of Fiscal Year 2017, that number increased to 186 students. As of October 2017, over 60 newly enrolled (first-year and transfer) students have met with a CUNY EDGE John Jay staff member.

While engagement in a learning environment enriches students’ experience beyond the quantifiable, the numbers also speak to how CUNY EDGE programming impacts student success. In an effort to support on-time graduation, EDGE encourages students to stay enrolled full-time whenever possible, a challenge for any student not to mention those with competing priorities and responsibilities outside of school. During the initial 7 months of programming, CUNY EDGE tracked their students and found that they engaged in over 235 touchpoints such as advisement, workshops, intersession classes and community-based opportunities. 165 students registered for fall 2017, 79% of students remain enrolled full-time, keeping pace with full-time enrollment rates among the College’s student body and surpassing rates across CUNY 4-year institutions. EDGE also tracked graduation rates for spring 2017 and concluded that 19 seniors graduated.

CUNY EDGE is built from the success of CUNY's Graduation Success Initiative, which used the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of Skills (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) as the foundation to guide students as they engaged in higher-order critical thinking as they also build a community of classmates and colleagues. The University's structure for the program is focused on developmental advising (Smith and Allen, 2006), a process that acknowledges students' unique needs and identities; integrates life, career, and educational goals; connects curricular and co-curricular experiences; and scaffolds opportunities to practice decision-making.

John Jay's CUNY EDGE Program, honed over five years of theory-to-practice application, takes the University's model further by focusing on student engagement as a tool for student success (Astin, 1984), connecting on-campus employment to mentorship and success outcomes for students on welfare (Christopher, 2005), bridging the divide with faculty and seeing faculty as partners in the success outcomes of each student (Simpkins, 2016), and an understanding of the barriers frequently facing low-income students (Strom, 2014; Weikart, 2005). These aspects have added to the framework provided by CUNY and created a unique program configuration at John Jay College that has proven in one year to produce incredible outcomes for our students and their families.

## Literature review

### *Welfare reform and the pursuit of higher education*

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed, ending the concept of social welfare as an entitlement<sup>2</sup>, and enacting a "welfare to work" philosophy that emphasized traditional employment as the sole path to self-sufficiency among the poor (Shaw et al., 2006). PRWORA is commonly referred to simply as "welfare reform." One provision of PRWORA is that recipients must participate in a "work activity" outside the home. Mink (1998: 105) asserts:

Throwing the full weight of welfare law behind market labor by poor single mothers, the [Personal Responsibility Act] ends welfare by redefining it. Economic provisions for mothers' care of children was once the primary purpose of welfare. Now, welfare law scorns care-giving by poor single mothers and so spurns their children.

Promoting market labor is inextricably linked to the assumption that poor mothers do not perform valuable work inside the home. This assumption is strikingly clear when welfare reform of 1996 is compared to other types of entitlement programs. Government issue benefits and social security are two examples of strong entitlement programs, largely because it is the prevalent belief that recipients from these groups have contributed to the system, thus strengthening the justification for allocating their benefits. Welfare is no longer considered a justifiable entitlement system, because the work ethic and lifestyle choices of recipients are called into question.

While welfare as an entitlement program has always been rooted in moral stipulations of its target population, this shift in welfare policy was a radical departure from the value

once given to women's work in the home over the outside labor market. Welfare began as "Mothers' pensions . . . enacted by state governments and implemented by localities . . . They defined mothers' care-giving work as socially productive, but only if caregivers met certain cultural and moral standards" (Mink, 1998: 45). But caregiving work was not the only activity that experienced a near-reversal in perceived value. Prior to the passage of PRWORA, education was encouraged as a means of self-improvement among welfare recipients, with studies showing that pursuit of higher education was highly correlated with positive employment, self-esteem, salary, and self-sufficiency outcomes for welfare recipients (Gittell et al., 1993, 1990).

Following the passage of PRWORA, states had freedom in structuring welfare policy, and deciding whether to allow educational pursuits to count toward work activity requirements necessary for retaining eligibility. Even with this freedom, many states felt the pull of a strong national mandate for employment over education and acquiesced to the employment-only norm (Shaw et al., 2006). In the wake of this change, public assistance recipients who were once students began to feel pressure to drop out in favor of seeking traditional employment to retain their benefits. In fact, research shows that the number of applicants for Title IV student aid that identified as welfare recipients dropped by 38% from the 1996/1997 to the 1998/1999 school years (Shaw et al., 2006). More specifically, a study comparing pre-and post-welfare reform college enrollment rates shows welfare recipients plunge from being 13% more likely to attend college than other poor women, to 7% less likely, over a two-year period, 1996 to 1998, that corresponds with modern welfare policy implementation (Cox and Spriggs, 2002).

As time went on, some states, including New York, began to expand allowance of educational activities for public assistance eligibility. Still, many of these expansions focused on vocational training or two-year community college degrees, with a meager 15 states allowing pursuit of bachelor level education by 2003 (Weikart, 2005). In 2014, the New York City Human Resource Administration extended welfare policy to make up to 12 months of work toward a four-year degree program an allowable activity to maintain eligibility for benefits. While these changes in New York City public assistance policy have made a four-year degree theoretically more accessible to welfare recipients, little focus has been put on enhancing student engagement and retention among this population once they enroll in school. CUNY EDGE has directly addressed these issues by launching the Human Resource Administration Work Study Program in 2015, followed by the start of CUNY EDGE university wide in 2016.

### *Public assistance and the student experience*

While the drop in enrollment among student recipients of welfare following the passage of PRWORA has been well documented (Cox and Spriggs, 2002; Shaw et al., 2006), the on-campus experience of those who continue to attend college has not. Among this dearth of more detailed information, one qualitative study (Simpkins, 2016) focusing on the experience of welfare recipients in a four-year degree program, sheds light on the particulars of navigating the educational and Human Resource Administration systems simultaneously. In response to narrative-style interview questions, participants describe

facing stigma, confusion, and the frustration of navigating what Simpkins (2016) refers to as a “double bureaucracy.” While the study focuses on this experience as a whole, participants identify factors that dictate the extent of their student engagement, such as the decision to self-disclose their status as welfare recipients to peers and experiences with professors who find out about their background. However, even as Simpkins presents the most in-depth portrait of student welfare recipients to date, questions remain surrounding how student engagement impacts these students beyond their self-perceptions.

This investigative gap may be due in part to an awareness gap between the realities of life as a low-income student and the experiences of the upper- and middle-class professionals that often dominate the landscape of higher education. Students have described a “presumption of access,” on the part of upper-class faculty who remain unaware of the points of privilege and access which they assume are universal, but are in fact unavailable to low-income students (King, 2012). Similarly, research has documented a number of barriers to the pursuit of higher education among Hispanic males – a demographic that is well represented in CUNY EDGE and John Jay College as a whole – that occur well before college attendance. These include aspiration to go to college, developing academic skills, access to entrance exams, and ability to submit all necessary paperwork (Borrego and Borrego, 2015), and represent points of access that privileged peers and faculty may take for granted. Given the high potential for this awareness gap, it becomes clear why a greater emphasis has not been put on engagement with student recipients of public assistance both in research and on a practical level.

Yet, parallels may be drawn from studies targeting student engagement among students similar to the CUNY EDGE population. For instance, one study shows that low-income students report lower levels of involvement on campus, both academically and in typical forms of engagement such as participation in clubs, organizations or programming (Terenzini et al., 2001). Similarly, a recent survey of first year students at a large research university found that first-generation students, a demographic common among EDGE students, reported lower levels of belonging on campus than non-first-generation peers (Stebleton et al., 2014). While such findings are common, research is not perfectly in agreement. Greene, Marti, and McClenney (2008), for example, posit that although African American and Latinx students statistically show lower academic performance when compared to white peers, they report higher levels of college engagement.

### *Engagement models for public assistance students*

A lack of clarity about rates of engagement among student populations is not surprising, as student engagement itself is a term whose operational definition and function is difficult to pin down in the world of higher education. While much more focus has been put on the study of student engagement, and a general consensus seems to exist regarding its benefits, much confusion remains as to what it entails and how it can best be enacted on campus. Furthermore, the definition of engagement appears to vary not only from campus to campus, but seems to vary within some campus communities as well. In Vuori’s (2014) interview-based research focused on comparing the understanding of student engagement on three campuses, researchers found that all three defined, enacted,

and viewed student engagement differently. Moreover, of the three, only one campus showed a consistent understanding of student engagement and its relation to campus mission across all levels of staff being interviewed.

In an effort to achieve clarity, many scholars have created classification systems to characterize student engagement. For instance, Leach and Zepke (2011) categorize student engagement as a function of four different factors. These include student motivation and agency, transactional engagement with faculty and fellow students, support from the institution, and active citizenship within the institution on the part of the student. Similarly, in a meta-analysis of student engagement research, Kahu (2013) identifies four common approaches to engagement: engagement as a set of student and institutional behaviors, engagement as a student psycho-social process, engagement as a function of institutional socio-political context, and a more holistic approach combining all factors. She goes on to cite inconsistent definitions of engagement, as well as a lack of focus on what leads to student engagement, among the limitations of existing research.

Furthermore, programming targeting engagement among post-PRWORA student welfare recipients has yet to be tested, despite many institutions creating programming to bolster engagement and retention among groups with similar demographics. While the Public Assistance Comprehensive Education (PACE) program, implemented at Tompkins Cortland Community College in 1987 to focus on vocational preparation, boasted an 88% retention rate for welfare students (Lieberman and Vaughn, 1990), it represents the interface of education with now outdated welfare policy. A more recent example is Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, where about half of the student body is made up of first-generation college students and students are predominantly of color, which attempted to improve student engagement and retention through a small cohort, learning community model (Bonet and Walters, 2016). The program places students in small-cohort classes with classmates of similar academic standing and test scores, a best practice given that students learn most effectively in the company of those at a similar academic level, and in communities with peer support and a collaborative learning process (Vygotsky, 1978; Tinto, 1997; Freire, 1996). In addition to class time, students are enrolled in tutoring labs to reinforce class concepts. Faculty members who teach these courses are paid for extra hours to encourage them to be more available to students beyond class time. The goal of these learning communities is to encourage relationships among students and faculty, and to create an environment that focuses on greater engagement in material and problem-solving around course content (Bonet and Walters, 2016).

In an effort to assess program outcomes, participants in four learning community sections were asked to complete a survey about engagement outcomes. Ultimately survey completion was too low to track results directly from student feedback. However, researchers were able to track upticks in student attendance, course completion, and student grades when compared to non-learning community sections of the same courses (Bonet and Walters, 2016). While lack of student engagement in the assessment aspect of this program raises questions about the extent to which overall engagement was affected by the learning community models, the concrete areas where improvement was measured do speak to successes in the arena of academic engagement. Ultimately, questions

remain about how to extend engagement within and beyond the classroom to the campus community as a whole, as well as which changes may be necessary to serve bachelor-level rather than community college students. Additionally, one must consider how to serve welfare recipient students as a unique population, rather than grouping them with a series of other demographic markers, such as first-generation status or racial identity.

### *Social equity and engaging welfare recipients*

The role of public administration programming in engaging student recipients of public assistance comes to light when considering social equity. Social equity<sup>3</sup> is commonly regarded as the fourth pillar of public administration, and many attempts have been made to promote it within the field through public administration education. For example, Norman-Major (2011) suggests that the integration of social equity in the public administration curriculum and frank discussion of the topic by educators is key to ensuring its presence in practice. Wyatt-Nichol et al. (2011) take this a step further, suggesting that a necessity for effecting change in the social equity curriculum is adequate socioeconomic representation. Still, while the importance of representation in public administration education is stressed, little focus is put on how best to ensure adequate representation. Plein et al. (2000) began to take this matter on in an investigation of one university's reaction to welfare reform. They conclude that faculty outreach is key to effectively working with a socioeconomically diverse student body, and that the institution must create structures that allow for independent faculty outreach efforts. We hope to build upon these findings by offering specific recommendations for supporting faculty outreach to student recipients of public assistance.

## **Research design**

This qualitative study explores the importance of engaging students on public assistance and how faculty can best engage socioeconomically diverse students in keeping with NASPAA standards (NASPAA, 2014). Initial data was collected during the 2017 fall semester using a student pilot survey (see Appendix A) which was administered at First of My Family, a CUNY EDGE group for first generation college students, as well as to attendees at a series of CUNY EDGE workshops. Following the student pilot phase, focus groups were held during the 2018 winter and spring semesters with faculty members and CUNY EDGE students. This article reports only on focus group findings, as the pilot survey was intended to shape focus group design by collecting baseline student sentiments regarding student engagement.

### *Student focus group*

A focus group model was chosen to allow researchers to collect a more comprehensive assessment of student engagement and to allow for follow up questions that delve deeper into the pilot survey responses. Because achieving high attendance rates at CUNY EDGE events is challenging, students were recruited into the focus group via email, text

message, and in-person informational sessions at key CUNY EDGE events. For recruiting purposes, an informational session was held at the CUNY EDGE spring kickoff event, held on 7 February 2018. After hearing a verbal presentation about the research and its goals, students could choose to sign up to receive more information. These students received individual outreach once a focus group date was set.

High achieving and highly engaged students were also targeted during focus group recruitment. Targeted emails were sent to students who had been awarded a book or meal voucher due to earning a grade point average above 3.5. Finally, less engaged students were targeted by outreach to students who had been classified as “high need.” These students were invited by email to share their thoughts about how the CUNY EDGE program and members of the faculty could help them become more engaged. These three groups were targeted during recruitment to attract a variety of student perspectives, from those with an active interest in engaging and participating to those who may struggle to engage on campus. The general CUNY EDGE population was also recruited via a group text messaging blast.

One student focus group (see Appendix B) was conducted on 14 March 2018 with 12 student participants. Though 12 students represent a small segment of the total CUNY EDGE population at John Jay College, the purpose of a focus group is not to produce generalizable data. Rather, the focus group is intended to provide rich data from individual perspectives (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1998; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Thorne, 2016). The focus group was held during the college’s “community hour,” a 75-minute break in classes that is typically set aside for student activities, specifically to accommodate the participation of commuter students in on-campus programming. The focus group was facilitated by a student research assistant to promote comfort and confidentiality amongst the focus group population, and an additional CUNY EDGE staff member was present to act as a note taker. Students were debriefed about the goal of the research project and the working definition of “student engagement,” and asked to discuss their answers to seven questions. In addition to being presented by the facilitator, discussion questions were displayed as a PowerPoint along with the working definition of “student engagement.”

### *Faculty focus groups*

The faculty researcher’s own experiences and perspectives on this project informed the approach to faculty focus groups; therefore, no pilot survey was conducted. Two faculty focus groups (see Appendix C) were conducted, one on 25 January 2018 and the other on 11 April 2018. The first focus group of faculty members was held during a faculty development workshop. During the workshop, a brief informational presentation was made about the CUNY EDGE program, how public assistance works for students, and about the nature of the research being conducted. Faculty members then participated in a group discussion prompting them to explore their experience engaging student recipients of public assistance. Faculty who had never had, or were unaware of, student recipients of public assistance in their classes were invited to reflect on engaging with non-traditional students and the student body at large.

Faculty development workshops were available to all John Jay faculty members regardless of direct experience with student recipients of public assistance. However, specific faculty members were targeted and recruited into the focus group session by using the CUNY EDGE attendance taking system to pinpoint professors with the highest enrollment of CUNY EDGE students during the 2017 fall semester. These professors were then sent an additional, individual invitation to the faculty development workshop in hopes of involving faculty members who had previous awareness of the CUNY EDGE program and its students. This focus group consisted of four faculty members. Four administrators, and one student intern participated in the workshop, and two CUNY EDGE staff members assisted as note-takers.

A second faculty focus group was held on 11 April 2018, independent of any school-sponsored faculty development activity. Faculty participants were again recruited using CUNY EDGE attendance data to identify faculty members who had the most contact with the target student population. This second faculty focus group included five participants, a faculty researcher acting as facilitator, and a research assistant acting as a note-taker.

## **Analysis and Findings**

Upon conducting focus groups among students and faculty, researchers found that while student engagement was of great importance to students and faculty members alike, student recipients of public assistance were often circumstantially confined to a narrow scope of engagement. Additionally, student and faculty focus group participants were able to shed light on barriers to student engagement, as well as creative solutions to promote engagement which have been used successfully in the past. Below we explain the student and faculty responses related to current modes of engagement, attitudes surrounding the importance of engagement, as well as factors impacting the promotion of student-faculty engagement. Based on these findings we will offer recommendations for the implementation of programming to promote student-faculty engagement, as well as future directions in research.

### ***Current modes of engagement***

A primary goal of this project was to investigate the forms of student engagement currently taking place among student recipients of public assistance. During the student focus group, participants described many of their sources of student engagement as stemming from support programs such as CUNY EDGE itself, Urban Male Initiative,<sup>4</sup> or Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK).<sup>5</sup> Students gravitated toward these organizations due to a level of comfort in engaging with staff and peers who already knew and understood their situation, and to whom an additional explanation would not need to be provided. They also identified campus offices, such as the health center, which had assisted them with specific issues.

When it came to engagement with faculty, student responses were mixed and ranged from the experience of a participant who had never engaged with faculty beyond basic

classwork to a student who sits down with each professor at the beginning of the semester to discuss her learning style. Most student participants agreed that engagement with faculty members varied significantly based on the individual faculty member in question. Faculty participants of the April 2018 focus group also showed agreement that they struggled to generalize their experiences with students on public assistance, largely due to differences between individual students. Faculty participants expressed great uncertainty in their ability to identify student recipients of public assistance, and thus their ability to gauge the nature of or desire for greater engagement.

### *Importance of engagement*

From all three student and faculty focus groups, the importance of and desire for engagement was emphasized. Participants across all student and faculty focus groups drew connections between engagement and student success, and immediately identified academic success as a result of engagement, and thus a motivator to engage. Student participants expressed the importance of faculty contact to help enhance and process learning outside of the classroom, as well as to maximize success on specific assignments. A participant in the March student focus group spoke about the benefits of being able to contextualize classroom learning with real life examples through conversation with faculty. Meanwhile, faculty members tended to frame academic success in the context of statistics connecting retention and class passage rates with high rates of engagement.

A second overarching response across all focus groups was the importance of student engagement in fostering relationships and networking between students and faculty, leading to greater future opportunities. For students, relationships with faculty were a result of student engagement that could be leveraged for access to knowledge, campus resources, and future opportunities. One student participant described being connected to a campus club that now represents his most meaningful engagement on campus through an existing relationship with a professor. Beyond the tangible, students highlighted the impact on their morale of being able to connect with faculty who “get it” while attending school, a sentiment that was echoed by faculty hoping to be able to “validate the students experience.” In addition to relationships resulting from engagement, faculty also treated relationship building as a prerequisite for student engagement. They spoke about the importance of using relationships as an entree into meaningful engagement with a student, allowing them to sense changes in student demeanor or performance and facilitate appropriate intervention.

Additionally, faculty reflected upon the importance of student engagement in the ability to hold students accountable. Recognizing the non-traditional student demographics that student recipients of public assistance often represent, faculty hypothesized that these students may have few support systems holding them accountable for their own academic success. Thus, faculty members viewed engagement with student recipients of public assistance, in particular, as an opportunity to be a point of connection on campus for a student with few other on or off campus academic supports. Students who voiced their own experiences support this, with several students recounting relationships

with faculty that were at times tense or difficult, but who they ultimately recognized as a consistent presence and factor in their academic growth.

While the importance of engagement with non-traditional students was widely acknowledged, faculty participants also raised the difficulties of achieving a balance between offering appropriate extra support while also realistically preparing these “non-traditional” students for the “traditional” world outside of college. Several faculty members described the “culture shock” experienced by graduates of supportive programming upon entering the “real world,” and wondered if they had done students a disservice by offering support and engagement in excess, or in the wrong ways. Students, on the other hand, did not share this concern. One student participant described the ways in which her current situation had already prepared her for the real world: balancing the responsibilities of being a parent, paying bills, and being a student. Extra support and engagement while navigating the college setting could only be seen as a helping factor, having prioritized other life skills and responsibilities by necessity.

### *Promoting meaningful engagement*

Students and faculty members across all focus groups identified setting realistic expectations as a major factor in promoting student engagement. When speaking about improving engagement with students, April faculty focus group participants touched upon the importance of having realistic expectations about student workloads. A handful of faculty participants referenced times that their ideas of manageable timelines or workloads caused conflict or disengagement, and how they might approach being mindful of not adding too much to a student’s plate in the future. Student participant responses aligned with these concerns, expressing a desire for faculty to acknowledge time and other commitments such as family responsibilities, lengthy commute times, and work for other classes. In response to concerns about realistic workload expectations, one faculty participant described an approach he uses to accommodate students while keeping them engaged in classwork. By granting each a student a “bank” of allowable late days to be used toward any assignment, this faculty member acknowledges that students may have priorities outside of school that need their attention while also promoting time management skills as students must use late days strategically.

Another common theme surrounding promoting meaningful engagement was the role of faculty in promoting engagement outside of the classroom. During the faculty focus group on 11 April 2018, one faculty member described the informational sessions and field trips that he hosted outside of class hours to allow students to engage with experiences around potential career paths. While students also emphasized the value of faculty interactions that wove such “real life” experience into classroom learning, they also stressed the importance of a model of engagement that they could access during their limited time on campus and that would accommodate their numerous outside responsibilities. Many student participants identified the programs that they found most engaging as those which allowed them a quiet space on campus to take care of their work, rather than those which demanded more time or travel.

Faculty participants also acknowledged their role in promoting engagement inside the classroom. One faculty focus group participant referenced the importance of acknowledging that although a professor may not be the primary point of engagement for a student, they can still actively promote that indirect engagement. He touted the success of a peer mentorship program and ongoing small group projects that were embedded into a seminar-style course that he taught exclusively for freshmen, noting that he and the peer mentor could say and do the same things with a vastly different engagement response from students. Still, he felt that by offering the course he provided an opportunity for students to engage more deeply on campus by building their own support network. Students confirmed the importance of promoting engagement through a peer support network. One student participant recounted a particularly difficult semester during which she found herself homeless and pregnant. Because the classroom environment created by one of her professors felt safe, she was able to share her experiences with her peers, receive support from them, and stay engaged on campus in ways that would not otherwise have been possible, given her situation.

Student and faculty participants alike acknowledged the reciprocal nature of promoting engagement on campus, or what they termed a “two-way street,” noting the requirement that both parties put in effort to maintain an engaged relationship. Faculty focus group participants reflected on the challenge of just “getting students across the threshold,” and building the relationship that would create greater ease in future engagement. When asked what advice they would give to faculty members when it came to promoting engagement, student focus group participants identified showing empathy, focusing on learning styles, and bringing personal experiences into classroom learning as factors that might make taking the first step easier. One student participant noted that professors were once students, an experience she would appreciate seeing them reflect back on in their interactions with current students. However, student participants were also quick to dole out advice to fellow students, highlighting the importance of choosing professors carefully and being prepared to speak to their professors frankly about their needs in the classroom.

## **Conclusions and future research**

The findings of this research project emphasize that for students on public assistance, engagement with faculty, peers, and the general campus community is of great importance. However, achieving the desired level of student engagement can be challenging, given the competing priorities that they often experience. This indicates that additional programming to promote student engagement, and make it more accessible, is necessary. While this study focuses on the experiences of students attending an urban commuter campus, these findings and recommendations can serve as a starting point for residential campuses. Although a residential campus experience may offer its unique challenges, barriers to student engagement for student recipients of public assistance persist in a residential environment. Based on our analysis, we pose the following recommendations for fostering greater engagement of students on public assistance.

Key findings highlighted the barriers, both logistical and relational, to direct engagement between students and faculty. Student and faculty participants alike also

emphasized the importance of a peer support group for student engagement. In light of these findings, we recommend the implementation of a peer mentorship model. Using this model, highly engaged student recipients of public assistance act as a bridge for their peers to direct engagement with faculty. Peer mentors would provide coaching for building relationships with faculty, for which many student recipients of public assistance have not been previously prepared or socialized. Peer mentorship would allow students to first engage with a support network whose experiences reflect their own, removing the significant barrier of self-identifying as a recipient of public assistance. Students could then explore methods of engagement in a safe environment while under the guidance of a peer with experience navigating similar situations. Additionally, this model offers flexibility in implementation, with the ability to be integrated into a classroom environment for greater faculty contact or integrated directly into supportive programming.

Peer mentorship programming also plays a dual role, providing an opportunity for additional development as mentors to students who are already engaged. These students would reap the benefits of developing leadership skills and gaining professional experience. In addition to the intrinsic benefits of serving as a mentor, it is important to ensure that peer mentors are able to be compensated with a stipend. Of course, the additional responsibilities of being a peer mentor do present a challenge to students already facing the challenges associated with being a recipient of public assistance. It is important to carefully select students who have already shown proficiency in effectively navigating these challenges. It is important to make adequate professional support and supervision available to these students to ensure that serving as a peer mentor does not have an adverse effect on their own educational pursuits.

Findings also show that students have a considerable desire to engage outside of a traditional classroom setting by exploring the real-life implications of academic material, as well as a willingness on the part of faculty to offer such opportunities. However, focus group findings also emphasize the importance of attention to careful time management and flexibility when engaging with student recipients of public assistance. We recommend that faculty think creatively about extending access to engagement outside of the classroom for students who may lack availability outside of class time. This may include building time into a syllabus for fields trips or career experiences that would normally take place outside of classroom hours. Faculty may also consider partnering with support programs for student recipients of public assistance to ensure that any research or teaching assistantships they offer could be counted toward public assistance work requirements. Creative approaches to integrating real world experiences are also possible without leaving the classroom, through role playing scenarios or using real world examples as case studies. By aligning engagement activities with work hours requirements, faculty could create an opportunity for students to benefit doubly from engagement on campus. When working with students with limited time or resources, faculty should consider how they can creatively make extracurricular engagement accessible and efficient.

Finally, findings show the importance of relationship building for student recipients of public assistance. We recommend that in seeking to engage a diverse student body,

faculty prioritize laying the groundwork for building trust and rapport with students. While networking relationships are themselves a product of engagement, an initial rapport and comfort are important precursors to establishing student-faculty engagement. Due to stigma surrounding public assistance, students may feel more vulnerable when first engaging with faculty and speaking about their campus experiences, making initial rapport all the more crucial. Additionally, “soft skills,” such as getting to know students and assessing their strengths and learning styles, can create greater opportunity for faculty to notice areas of need and effectively initiate engagement. By shifting the focus from logistical to relational availability, faculty may be able to engage more effectively with students who experience stigma surrounding their socioeconomic level.

### *Future directions for student engagement research*

Given the gaps in the current understanding of student engagement among student recipients of public assistance, and the mandate by NASPAA (2014) standards for educational programming to consider accessibility to an economically diverse student population, this project set out to explore current modes of student engagement for student recipients of public assistance. Student and faculty focus groups revealed that while student-faculty engagement is currently happening in traditional modes, such as the classroom setting or in office hours, the majority of student engagement is taking place with other specialized campus programming. A consensus was reached across focus group participants that student-faculty engagement among student recipients of public assistance was of particular importance given the role that it plays in academic achievement, building networking relationships, and providing support and accountability that students may not receive outside of school. Recommendations for promoting greater engagement included setting realistic expectations for what each party can contribute to an engaged relationship, taking a creative approach to where and when students are engaged, and stressing the responsibility that both parties have to engage with one another.

This research represents a first step in what should be an extended research agenda to fill gaps in the literature concerning both student engagement and the experiences of student recipients of public assistance. This work examines one institution, and the findings and new questions raised should be tested across the larger field of public administration. This can be done by administering a survey to Master’s of Public Administration (MPA) program directors and faculty, performing a content analysis of MPA websites for information about helping students with economic struggles, or a combination of similar data collections that examine engagement of students on public assistance across the entire field. Examining whether MPA programs take public assistance and social equity issues into account in their admissions processes and awarding graduate assistantships and other forms of funding is another avenue for exploring engagement amongst students on public assistance.

Given the focus of the current research on the student-faculty relationship, questions remain surrounding how best to promote engagement beyond the classroom and with a diverse group of campus resources and stakeholders. Future research could benefit by

expanding the participant pool to include a greater number of students and faculty, as well as campus staff beyond faculty, including student affairs personnel and other campus support staff. Consideration should be given to how to reconcile the competing priorities that limit the time that student recipients of public assistance are able to spend on campus with their pervasive expressed desire to become more deeply involved in the campus community. Connecting with campus organizations whose primary mission is to engage students, particularly those whose focus is on other non-traditional student groups, may also help generate additional creative approaches to student engagement and better inform future programming.

Future research should build upon the preliminary findings collected over the course of this project, and explore in more depth the engagement that can be promoted within the classroom setting. Developing opportunities for greater engagement, both with faculty and peers, into classroom hours, allows student recipients of public assistance to engage with an economy of time that complements their often-complicated schedules. Particular attention should be paid to how existing models of enhanced engagement for the classroom could be tailored to fit the needs of student recipients of public assistance. In particular the first year experience seminar, touted by a faculty participant for its small group and peer mentor components, should be examined as an option for cohorts of student recipients of public assistance. Additionally, attention should be paid to the nature of peer engagement among these different models, as well as its importance and how it can be promoted in the classroom. This would mirror the current research focus on faculty engagement, and acknowledge student peers as an important part of the campus support structure for student recipients of public assistance.

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## Notes

1. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) defines retention as, “A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage.”
2. Welfare pre- Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was far from perfect, with many shortcoming including earned income limitations and penalties incurred for adult males in the household (Trattner, 1999).
3. Defined as “The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy (National Academy of Public Administration, 2008).”
4. Urban Male Initiative is a program that provides personal, social, academic and professional support for underrepresented groups, specifically African American and Latino males at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.
5. Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) is a program designed to meet the needs of students who are considered to be economically disadvantaged and academically underprepared.

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## Appendix A

### *CUNY EDGE faculty fellowship student engagement survey*

We are conducting a research study to investigate the nature of student engagement among CUNY EDGE students, why engagement is important, and how it can be improved.

We are requesting your participation in this study. By agreeing to participate in the study, you will be giving your consent for the researchers to include your responses in our data analysis. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. You will be able to withdraw from the survey at any time and all survey responses will be deleted, including the informed consent agreement. Return of the questionnaire will be considered your consent to participate.

There will be no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments or other identification of you as an individual participant. If you wish, you may request a copy of the results of this research study by writing to the researchers, Nicole Elias and Madeleine Marrin at [nelias@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:nelias@jjay.cuny.edu) or [mmarrin@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:mmarrin@jjay.cuny.edu).

*Please answer the questions below, keeping in mind the following definition of “student engagement”*

**CUNY EDGE Student Engagement.** An informal, non-required, reciprocal relationship among CUNY EDGE students and other members of the John Jay community that contributes to achieving the larger CUNY EDGE goals.

1. Is being engaged on campus important to you? Why or why not?
2. Describe a time that you felt engaged on campus by an organization or faculty member. What made the experience engaging?
3. Have you participated in any of the following on-campus student engagement activities? Select all that apply.

- Student Government
  - Urban Male Initiative
  - Community Outreach
  - On-Campus Employment
  - Work Study
  - Internship
  - Athletic Team/Clubs
  - Academic Club
  - Fine/Performing Arts Clubs
  - Cultural Clubs
  - Educational Clubs
  - Community Service Clubs
  - Political Clubs
  - Religious Club
  - Faculty Office Hours
  - Tutoring
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. Describe your ideal campus experience. What would you need to make it a reality?
  5. How would you describe your experiences with John Jay professors?
  6. If you could give professors one piece of advice about engaging with students, what would it be? Why?
  7. Consider the following scenario:
 

Sandra is a junior at John Jay College, majoring in Criminal Justice. She transferred last year from BMCC. She is 26 years old. Outside of school Sandra cares for her 2-year-old son. She visits CUNY EDGE each semester to fill out her FIA during walk-in hours, but rarely schedules advisement sessions and does not attend workshops. Sandra attends tutoring sessions occasionally, and only goes to professors' office hours if she needs to ask about a specific grade issue. She has thought about trying out career counseling, but has not gotten around to it yet.

What do you think CUNY EDGE should do to help Sandra engage with members of the John Jay community? Please suggest specific programs, activities, or other ideas to engage Sandra.
  8. Demographic Information
 

What is your age?

How do you identify your gender?

How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

What year are you in school?

Are you a transfer student?

How many years have you attended John Jay?

Do you attend full-time or part-time?

What is your major?

## Appendix B

### *CUNY EDGE student focus group*

#### *Introduction*

We are conducting a research study to investigate the nature of student engagement among CUNY EDGE students, why engagement is important, and how it can be improved.

We are requesting your participation in this focus group. By agreeing to participate in the study, you will be giving your consent for the researchers to include your responses in our data analysis. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. You will be able to withdraw at any time.

There will be no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments or other identification of you as an individual participant. If you wish, you may request a copy of the results of this research study by writing to the researchers, Nicole Elias and Madeleine Marrin at nelias@jjay.cuny.edu or mmarrin@jjay.cuny.edu.

#### *We developed the following definition of “student engagement”*

*CUNY EDGE student engagement.* An informal, non-required, reciprocal relationship among CUNY EDGE students and other members of the John Jay community that contributes to achieving the larger CUNY EDGE goals.

1. From this definition of engagement, is being engaged on campus important to you? Why or why not?
2. Describe a time that you felt engaged on campus by a faculty member. What made the experience engaging?
3. Have you participated in any of the following on-campus student engagement activities? Describe these experiences.
  - Student Government
  - Urban Male Initiative
  - Community Outreach
  - On-Campus Employment
  - Work Study
  - Internship
  - Athletic Team/Clubs
  - Academic Club
  - Fine/Performing Arts Clubs
  - Cultural Clubs
  - Educational Clubs
  - Community Service Clubs
  - Political Clubs
  - Religious Club
  - Faculty Office Hours
  - Tutoring

4. Describe your ideal campus experience. What would you need to make it a reality?
5. How would you describe your experiences with John Jay professors— both inside and outside the classroom?
6. If you could give professors one piece of advice about engaging with students, what would it be? Why?
7. Consider the following scenario:

Sandra is a junior at John Jay College, majoring in Criminal Justice. She transferred last year from BMCC. She is 26 years old. Outside of school Sandra cares for her 2-year-old son. She visits CUNY EDGE each semester to fill out her FIA during walk-in hours, but rarely schedules advisement sessions and does not attend workshops. Sandra attends tutoring sessions occasionally, and only goes to professors' office hours if she needs to ask about a specific grade issue. She has thought about trying out career counseling, but has not gotten around to it yet.

What do you think CUNY EDGE should do to help Sandra engage with members of the John Jay community? Please suggest specific programs, activities, or other ideas to engage Sandra.

## Appendix C

### *CUNY EDGE faculty focus group*

#### *Introduction*

- We are conducting a research study to investigate the nature of student engagement among CUNY EDGE students, why engagement is important, and how it can be improved.
- Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. You will be able to withdraw at any time. Your responses will be included our data analysis.
- There will be no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments or other identification of you as an individual participant.
- If you wish, you may request a copy of the results of this research study by writing to the researchers, Nicole Elias and Madeleine Marrin at nelias@jjay.cuny.edu or mmarrin@jjay.cuny.edu.

#### *We developed the following definition of “student engagement”*

*CUNY EDGE student engagement.* An informal, non-required, reciprocal relationship among CUNY EDGE students and other members of the John Jay community that contributes to achieving the larger CUNY EDGE goals.

1. From this definition of engagement, do you think engaging students on campus important? Why or why not?
2. Provide specific examples of when faculty-student engagement has been productive and rewarding for you and your students. What made this experience positive?
3. Provide specific examples of when faculty-student engagement was not successful for you and your students. What did you learn from this experience for improving engagement in the future?
4. Please describe any new/creative engagement strategies that would like to try with students.
5. If you could give students one piece of advice for engaging with faculty, what would it be? Why?
6. Consider the following scenario:

Sandra is a junior at John Jay College, majoring in Criminal Justice. She transferred last year from BMCC. She is 26 years old. Outside of school Sandra cares for her 2-year-old son. She visits CUNY EDGE each semester to fill out her FIA during walk-in hours, but rarely schedules advisement sessions and does not attend workshops. Sandra attends tutoring sessions occasionally, and only goes to professors' office hours if she needs to ask about a specific grade issue. She has thought about trying out career counseling, but has not gotten around to it yet.

What do you think staff and faculty members could do to help Sandra engage with members of the John Jay community? Please suggest specific programs, activities, or other ideas to engage Sandra.