



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Promoting Health for Academic Success:

An Assessment of Opportunities at City University of New York

February 2018

A Report by Healthy CUNY and the
CUNY School of Public Health

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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH & HEALTH POLICY

For almost 175 years, City University and its predecessors have created pathways for academic success for young people of New York City. Today CUNY continues its tradition as “one the America’s great working- class universities”. In recent years, CUNY has propelled almost six times as many low-income students into the middle class and beyond as all eight Ivy League campuses, plus Duke, M.I.T., Stanford and Chicago, combined. By providing an affordable education to the diverse population of New York City, CUNY elevates the city’s educationally, economically, culturally and socially.

However, as at other public universities serving low-income urban populations, only about 25% of CUNY’s community college students and about 33% of undergraduates complete their degree within several years of enrollment and many never finish. Dropping out of college deprives students of the lifetime educational, health and economic benefits that a college degree confers and imposes high costs on CUNY and New Yorkers. One important reason for the high dropout rates is that many students encounter health and social problems that undermine their academic progress.

This report, sponsored the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy and Healthy CUNY, a university-wide initiative to promote student health and academic success, documents CUNY’s resources, challenges and opportunities to improve the academic success of its students by taking on the health and social problems that can block academic success and graduation.

A key objective of this report is to highlight CUNY’s innovative and promising approaches to improving the well-being and academic success of its students, so it can serve as a model for other large, public university systems across the country. Another is to identify some of the challenges that CUNY faces in promoting health for academic success to provide evidence that can be used to strengthen existing or create new policies, programs and services.

Using data from literature reviews, two surveys of representative samples of CUNY students in 2011 and 2015,¹ focus groups with students, interviews with faculty and staff and environmental scans of CUNY campuses, we examine four domains of health as they relate to academic success for CUNY undergraduates: 1) Mental Health, 2) Sexual and Reproductive Health and Healthy Relationships, 3) Health Care Access and Coverage, and 4) Food Insecurity and Diet.

Our review of the health problems facing CUNY students begins with the recognition that our students bring considerable strengths to their university experience. They are after all the success stories of New York City, having overcome poverty, racism, and inadequately resourced schools to graduate from high school and enter college. Most can depend on their families, peers and communities to provide important emotional, financial and moral support. And CUNY itself makes invaluable contributions to advancing our students’ educational and life aspirations: a dedicated faculty and staff; a rich array of student academic, financial and social services; and affordable tuition. We call attention to problems in the belief that our students and the university deserve our most determined efforts to identify and overcome any obstacles that interfere with our students’ academic, work and life success.

The Four Domains of Health Affecting CUNY Students' Academic Success

More than half of CUNY undergraduates—almost 100,000 students—reported at least one of the problems that have been shown to undermine academic success and almost 25% reported two or more of these problems.

Mental Health

CUNY students experience mental health problems at worrying rates.

- More than 18% of CUNY undergraduates (defined as students enrolled at community colleges and four-year schools) suffer from depression and 20% suffer from anxiety.
- More than 9% of students 18-25 and 6.4% of those 26 and older had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year.
- Multiple stressors impose a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minority students, women, and community college students compared to their respective peers.
- One third of CUNY students reported that a mental health issue interfered with schoolwork in the past 12 months.

Sexual and Reproductive Health including Healthy Relationships

In the transition from adolescence to adulthood, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and promoting sexual and reproductive health are key developmental tasks. Success sets a foundation for lifetime health while problems such as unwanted pregnancies, lack of support for parenting young children, or partner violence can interrupt schooling or make life miserable. With two-thirds of CUNY students between the ages 18 and 25, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and healthy relationships are a central feature of their lives.

- Fewer than one third of campus clinics provide contraceptive services or methods, and only 5% of students relied on these clinics for acquiring contraception.
- About 6% of CUNY students got pregnant or made someone pregnant in the past year; most (71%) were unintended
- Approximately 4,000 students become parents each year; more than 12,000 parent children under 18; yet only a few of those w/ young children can enroll their children in CUNY's limited number of childcare center slots.
- Nearly 7% of students report violence from or fear of an intimate partner.

Health Insurance and Health Care Access

Health care access and insurance coverage are crucial for supporting student health. Those with reliable health care get care earlier, manage disease better and spend less on health care.

- Nearly 10% of CUNY undergraduates lack any form of health insurance, down from the 19% who were uninsured in 2010, prior to the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. The success in cutting the rate of lack of insurance almost in half in five years demonstrates the ways that national policy can help students to overcome health conditions that can disrupt academic progress
- More than 15% of students do not have regular access to health care, defined as having a regular doctor or other provider. Such continuity of care is associated with fewer health problems and higher use of preventive services
- Uninsured students were more likely to drop out, have an enrollment interruption or take a leave of absence than insured students.

Food Security and Diet

Food insecurity is prevalent for CUNY students and their communities and families. Hungry students and those who worry about how to pay for their next meal have trouble focusing on school work.

- Approximately 15% of students report they had gone hungry sometimes or often in the past year because they lacked resources to buy food. This too represents a decrease from the 22.7% of students who reported this in 2010, demonstrating the capacity to significantly reduce food insecurity with focused action.
- One quarter of students had to skip a meal because they could not afford food
- Almost 30% were sometimes or often unable to eat balanced or nutritious meals
- In addition, 16.3% of CUNY undergraduates reported they were obese, defined as having a Body Mass Index greater than 30. Previous literature documents that obesity is often associated with mental health problems and can interfere with academic success, relationships not fully explored in this report.

CUNY Assets and Resources

Fortunately, our report identified significant resources—people, programs, and policies -- that are helping students to overcome the health and social problems they face, and, with increased coordination, resources and attention, these resources could play an even stronger role. A few that are highlighted in the report are:

People

CUNY students themselves provide support, information and role models for their peers. In focus groups, students told us their friends and peers were often trusted and available resources for moral support, information on services and referrals, and motivation to persevere in the face of hardship. Healthy CUNY's Mental Health Ambassadors, trained students who encourage their peers to get help for mental health problems and campaign to reduce the stigma of admitting and seeking help for a mental health problem, illustrate this potential as do many other peer programs at CUNY in mental health, sexual and reproductive health and wellness.

Staff of academic, health and social service programs serve thousands of students on campus every day and are often compassionate, dedicated and skilled professionals. Many go out of their way to tailor their services to the unique needs of a student and often work with modest—sometimes clearly inadequate—resources to meet the full needs of students who ask for help. While our



Mental Health Ambassadors bring messages of hope to their peers during campus outreach event.

report shows that many students are unaware of these services or their staff, those who have used them are generally satisfied and report positive experiences.

Faculty are reported by students in focus groups as trusted credible sources of information. Students have daily or weekly interactions with the faculty who teach their classes. Finding additional ways to

support faculty to help students get help for the health and social problems that undermine academic success could provide CUNY with an additional powerful helping force.

Programs

Mental Health Counseling Centers, located on 19 campuses, serve students from 21 out of 25 campuses. CUNY counseling centers support the academic mission of the university and the academic success of students by providing high quality counseling and mental health services to students and consultative services to faculty and staff. Counselors assist students to address psychological and adjustment issues such as depression, anxiety, relationship problems and psychosocial stress that can negatively affect academic performance, student retention, and graduation rates. The centers work collaboratively with students, faculty, and staff to support psychological well-being. All enrolled full-time or part-time students are eligible for counseling at these centers and counseling is generally free for short-term counseling.

Campus Health Services and Wellness Programs provide a wide range of health services on 18 CUNY campuses. They monitor CUNY's compliance with New York City immunization requirements and sponsor health fairs and health education programs. Some campuses have on-site health providers who provide a limited range of services to CUNY students while others have affiliations with community-based health centers where they refer students. CUNY Central Office of Student Affairs provides some support and monitoring of these centers.

Single Stop provides free comprehensive social, legal and financial services to students at CUNY's six

community colleges and at John Jay College. Single Stop counselors use a computerized tool to screen students for their eligibility for more than 40 public benefits (e.g., health insurance programs, nutrition programs, housing assistance, subsidies for childcare, energy assistance) as well as tax credits. The campus-based Single Stop counselors then use this information to guide students through the process of applying for benefits.

Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is a comprehensive program for students pursuing their associate degrees at nine CUNY colleges that seeks to help associate degree seeking students earn their degrees as quickly as possible, with a goal of graduating at least 50% of students within three years. ASAP provides students with the academic, social, and financial support they need to achieve this goal.

Food Pantries are located at ten CUNY campuses to provide free food to food insecure students and their families.

Child Care Programs available on CUNY also offers child care programs on 19 campuses, providing low cost child care to about 1,500 children of CUNY students, who can leave their children at the programs while they attend classes.

Each of these provides important services to CUNY students. However, many students are unaware of their existence, few programs have the resources for active outreach to those who do not find them on their own, and coordinating these programs to provide linked, comprehensive services to students in need has proven to be challenging.

Policies

Federal, state, municipal and university policies can make it easier or harder for college students to complete their degrees. As described previously, the Affordable Care Act enabled many CUNY students to obtain health insurance and contributed to cutting in half the rate of lack of health insurance among CUNY undergraduates, from 20% to less than 10%. Similarly, changes in SNAP enrollment rules in New York City and State –as well as new CUNY-based food security programs, helped to reduce the proportion of students experiencing food insecurity between 2010 and 2015.

Within CUNY several policies contribute to making it easier for students to complete their degrees and to reduce the sources of stress that can interfere with academic success. These includes policies that focus on improving and coordinating student services, developing basic writing and math skills that reduce time in remedial courses, and assuring CUNY’s immigrant students that the university will not cooperate with Federal efforts to deport them unless forced to do so by a court. Other policies establish partnerships with city agencies such as Human Resources Administration’s Office of Citywide Health Insurance Access to assist in enrolling CUNY students in health insurance, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene for promoting access for reproductive health care for CUNY students, and the New York City Agency for Children’s Services to establish supported housing for CUNY students leaving the foster care system at age 18.

Cross Cutting Recommendations

This report identifies both challenges to promoting health for academic success at CUNY and existing assets that can be mobilized within CUNY to support this goal. Recognizing that CUNY students live full and complicated lives as students, employees, family and community members simultaneously, successful interventions need to be grounded in a multi-level and integrated approach. Based on the review presented in this report, we offer the following cross-cutting recommendations to the CUNY Chancellor and Board of Trustees, discussed in greater detail in the full report:



A student enrolls in health care coverage at Lehman College.

1. **Improve coordination and focus of CUNY Student Services (including health and mental health clinics).** CUNY offers dozens of special programs to meet the breadth and depth of its students’ educational, economic, social and health needs. Some are available CUNY-wide; others only at one or a few campuses. On many campuses, these worthy and needed program operate in isolation from the others and lack central coordination, quality assurance or evaluation. Improved coordination, planning and information exchanges among these programs at both the campus and university levels could improve outcomes such as graduation rates and save money.
2. **Establish partnerships with health care and social service providers.** CUNY lacks the mandate and resources to be able to itself provide its students with the range of services needed to meet their health and social needs. At the same time, a plethora of such programs exist throughout New York City, often seeking clients who can use their services, and bring them revenue streams. By assigning a senior CUNY leader the responsibility for exploring, negotiating and monitoring such relationships,

CUNY could better meet the needs of its students, more efficiently use its own resources, and contribute more fully to improving the well-being of young adults in New York City.

3. **Sponsor research and evaluation to provide evidence to improve services.** Documenting the ways that current CUNY student, health and social services benefit—or fail to benefit -- its students is an essential step towards the establishment of quality, evidence –based and efficient services. Currently, CUNY has not made such monitoring a priority. In addition, the emerging interdisciplinary field of inequality studies, especially of young adults, provides CUNY with an opportunity to gain national recognition by leveraging and coordinating its existing faculty expertise, student services and its unique student population to studying these domains. Producing new evidence to inform scientific understanding of the complex reciprocal relationships between health and higher education could be a distinct CUNY contribution towards reducing inequalities in education, health and income.
4. **Engage CUNY students in promoting health for academic success.** CUNY is committed to developing opportunities for experiential learning and already thousands of CUNY students play some role in peer counseling or education, advocacy or student services. By focusing and coordinating these activities and linking them to academic fieldwork, internship and independent study programs, CUNY gains a powerful asset for promoting health for academic success and offers its students new ways to gain useful professional skills.
5. **Define new roles for faculty and staff.** The research literature shows that connection to caring adults is an important determinant of academic success. Many CUNY students told our research team that they look to their own classroom faculty and advisers, as well as the counselors they see, for credible, valued guidance in overcoming their obstacles to academic success. Many faculty and support staff want to help their students overcome problems but often lack the skills, tools and infrastructure to realize this hope. By allocating institutional resources to helping faculty –even if only a fraction chooses to take on this role, CUNY can mobilize a powerful and effective resource for supporting success and overcoming the health and social problems that interfere with academic progress.
6. **Affirm a university commitment to promoting health for academic success.** A commonly expressed view within CUNY is that the university should narrow its mission and focus solely on education – not take on the multiple life challenges that its students encounter. In this view, CUNY will never have the resources to take on this larger role, its current staff lack the capacity to embrace these new responsibilities and other institutions are better suited for this task. In our view, this perspective misses the integral connections between health and academic success. We make the case that promoting health will better enable CUNY to achieve its main goal of education.
7. **Chart next steps for realizing vision and identify funding streams and resources for sustaining new approaches.** We call on the Chancellor and Board of Trustees to develop a strategic plan for making the focus of CUNY’s current health and social service programs on reducing the health and social problems that interfere with academic success. We recommend wide consultation with students, faculty, staff of student services, outside providers and experts in the field in the development of such a plan.

Conclusion

More than half of CUNY undergraduates reported one or more of the eight health or social conditions we identified as having the potential to undermine academic success and almost a quarter reported two or more of these conditions. These are depression, anxiety, pregnancy or parenting of young children, partner violence, lack of health insurance, no regular healthcare provider, food insecurity and obesity. By helping student to overcome these obstacles to academic success, CUNY –and other universities serving low-income urban populations-- can contribute more fully to reducing the educational, health, income and life satisfaction inequalities that characterize New York City and the United States.



BCC Students sitting near Gould Memorial Hall.

By strengthening and better coordinating its existing student support services on conditions that interfere with graduation and academic success, establishing clear and sustainable partnerships with the multitude of the city’s health and social service programs, and engaging the passion and energy of students in improving their own, their families’, their communities’ and their campuses’ health, CUNY can make even stronger contributions to its students success as well as the well-being and economic development of the city. By committing themselves to helping CUNY students to overcome the health and social problems that interfere with academic success, the CUNY Board and Chancellor can write the next chapter in one of America’s great working-class universities.

Suggested citation: Freudenberg N, Watnick D, Jones H, Lamberson P. *Promoting Health for Academic Success: An Assessment of Challenges and Opportunities at City University Of New York*, CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, 2018.

The full report with references is available [here](#).

¹ The 2015 Healthy CUNY Survey included a representative sample of about 3,000 CUNY students aged 18 to 30. Results reported in this report describe the community college and undergraduate students included in the survey. Details are available from authors.