

Building human capital for cash assistance clients: New York City's CUNY EDGE program

July 2025

Hannah Karabatsos

Kinsey Dinan

Edith Kealey, PhD

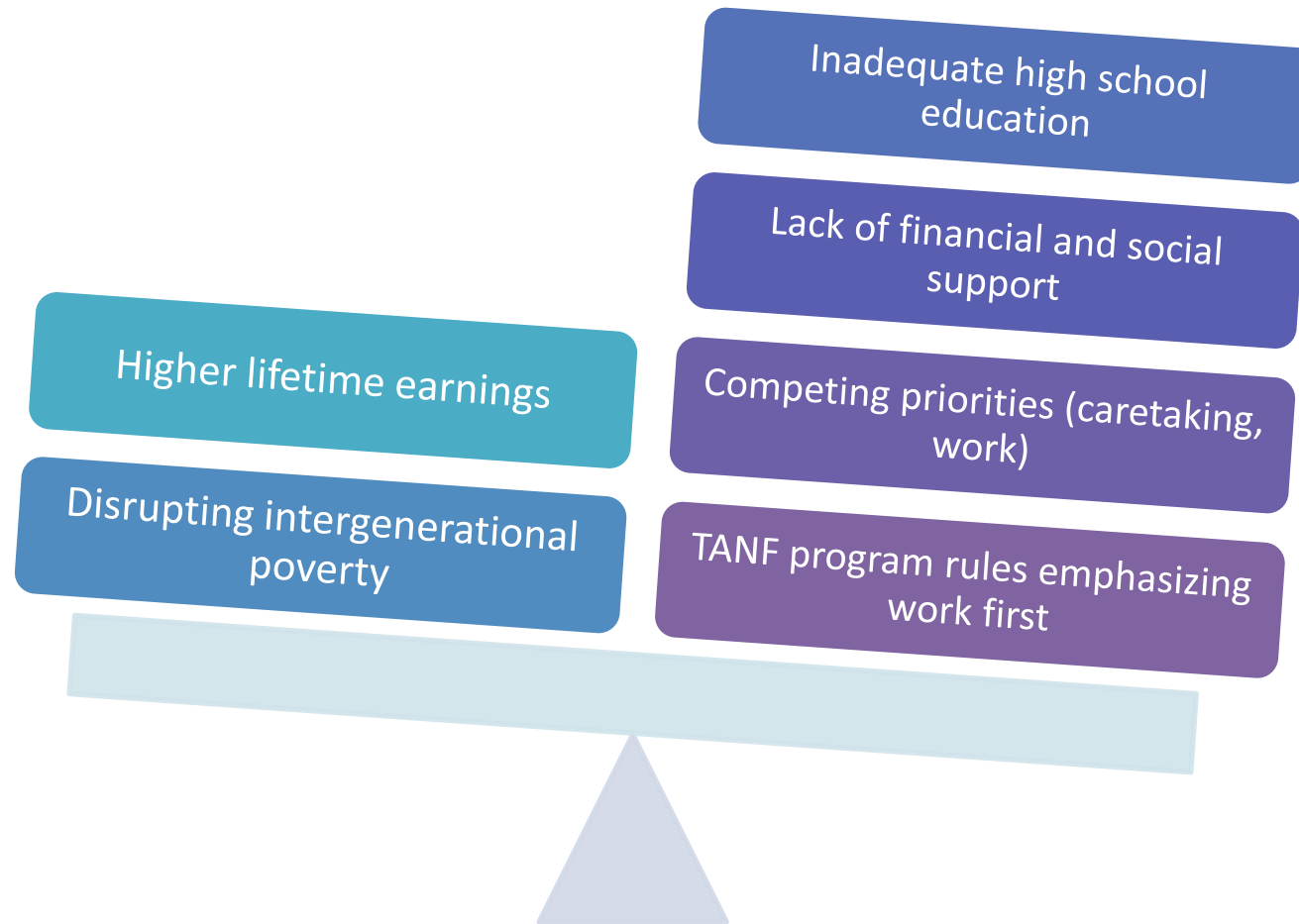
Office of Evaluation and Research

DSS OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND POLICY INNOVATION



College is an engine for economic mobility...

...but low-income students are less likely to enroll and graduate.*



- Rigorous studies of the ASAP model pioneered at the City University of New York (CUNY) show wrap-around supports for low-income students can improve college outcomes.
- Some states (e.g., CA, KY, ME, PA, VT) and localities (NYC) provide supports specifically targeted to TANF recipients.
- This presentation highlights findings from a study of NYC's CUNY EDGE program for cash assistance clients.

“CUNY EDGE’s mission is to help CUNY students who are receiving public assistance achieve academic excellence, graduate on time, and find employment.”

- The Educate, Develop, Graduate, Empower (EDGE) program is a partnership between the NYC Department of Social Services’ Human Resources Administration (DSS HRA) and the City University of New York (CUNY).
- EDGE serves students at 20 CUNY campuses who are receiving cash assistance (CA) benefits.
- The program facilitates student engagement with CA program requirements and supports, offers academic and personal advisement, and provides other resources including tutoring, career services, and workshops.
- Program context changed notably during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., waiver of CA work requirements).



The DSS Office of Evaluation and Research (OER) led a mixed-methods evaluation to explore the CUNY EDGE program model, service uptake, and educational outcomes.

Domain	Quantitative	Qualitative
Sample	All students participating in EDGE for at least one semester, Fall 2018 – Spring 2023 (n=11,410 unique individuals and 28,300 student-semesters)	12 individual and small group interviews (n=24 interviewees) at CUNY EDGE Central Office and four college offices identified by CUNY*
Data	CUNY student records (demographics, educational attainment, and EDGE participation) over full study period	Detailed notes from each semi-structured interview compiled and reconciled by project lead
Analytic approach	Analyzed across time (pre/post COVID) and by degree type (AA/BA) using descriptive and bivariate statistics in R and SPSS	Analyzed using structured analysis in Excel
Key research areas	Participant engagement and educational outcomes	Program model and staff / student experiences**

Core Services

- The vast majority of EDGE services are provided in one-on-one advising sessions, with group events garnering less engagement.
- Staff we spoke with expressed deep commitment to the program mission; many were former EDGE participants.
- Some flexibility across campuses in service design and delivery.

HRA Case Support	Academic Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School letters - Understanding CA case requirements/sanctions - Connecting to car fare and childcare - Completing other HRA forms (ex. declaration of employment, re-budgeting) - Tracking required monthly engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advising (declaring majors, course selection, etc.) - Tutoring (in-house or connecting to campus-wide resources) - Support for academic costs (intersession fees, graduation cap and gown, textbooks) - Reaching out to students who withdrew
Career Support	Personal Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resume and cover letter writing/editing - Mock interviews - Connecting students to internship/career opportunities - Matching current students to alumni 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connecting students to resources (food pantries, etc.) - Referrals to mental health providers - Skill workshops (financial literacy, time management, job search, etc.) - Student-run CUNY EDGE club

The staff and students we interviewed emphasized the unique value of the EDGE program in supporting CA clients at CUNY.

“There’s one piece about CUNY EDGE I’ve never really been able to quantify, and it’s the personal connection between our staff and students.” - *Staff*

“I haven’t really had to do a thing with HRA stuff with how supportive [EDGE staff] are.”
- *Student*

“It is our mission that students not only remove themselves from the welfare rolls but learn how to overcome poverty for themselves and their families.” - *Staff*

“We provide a platform where students can be nurtured and helped to get where they want to go, I can’t think of anything better to do than that.” - *Staff*

“I always schedule for the last appointment of the day because our conversations drag out and [my advisor] is happy to stay even an extra hour.” - *Student*

“I consider it a very foundational support here. You can come with grievances like home or academic and they support and guide you.” - *Student*

“We never gave up on them, so they never gave up on themselves.”
- *Staff*

“They have given me the drive to continue to push forward. I am a first generation student, and on your own there isn’t a direction...it’s nice to be able to talk to someone and gain that knowledge.” – *Student*

EDGE participants were far more likely to identify as Black and/or Latino and as women compared to the overall CUNY student body.*

	Number	Percent
<i>Race/Ethnicity*</i>		
Hispanic/Latino	5,626	49.3%
African American/Black	5,560	48.7%
White	1,720	15.1%
Asian	701	6.1%
<i>Gender</i>		
Woman	8,424	73.8%
Man	2,957	25.9%
Another identity	29	0.2%

*Race/ethnicity categories are not mutually exclusive.

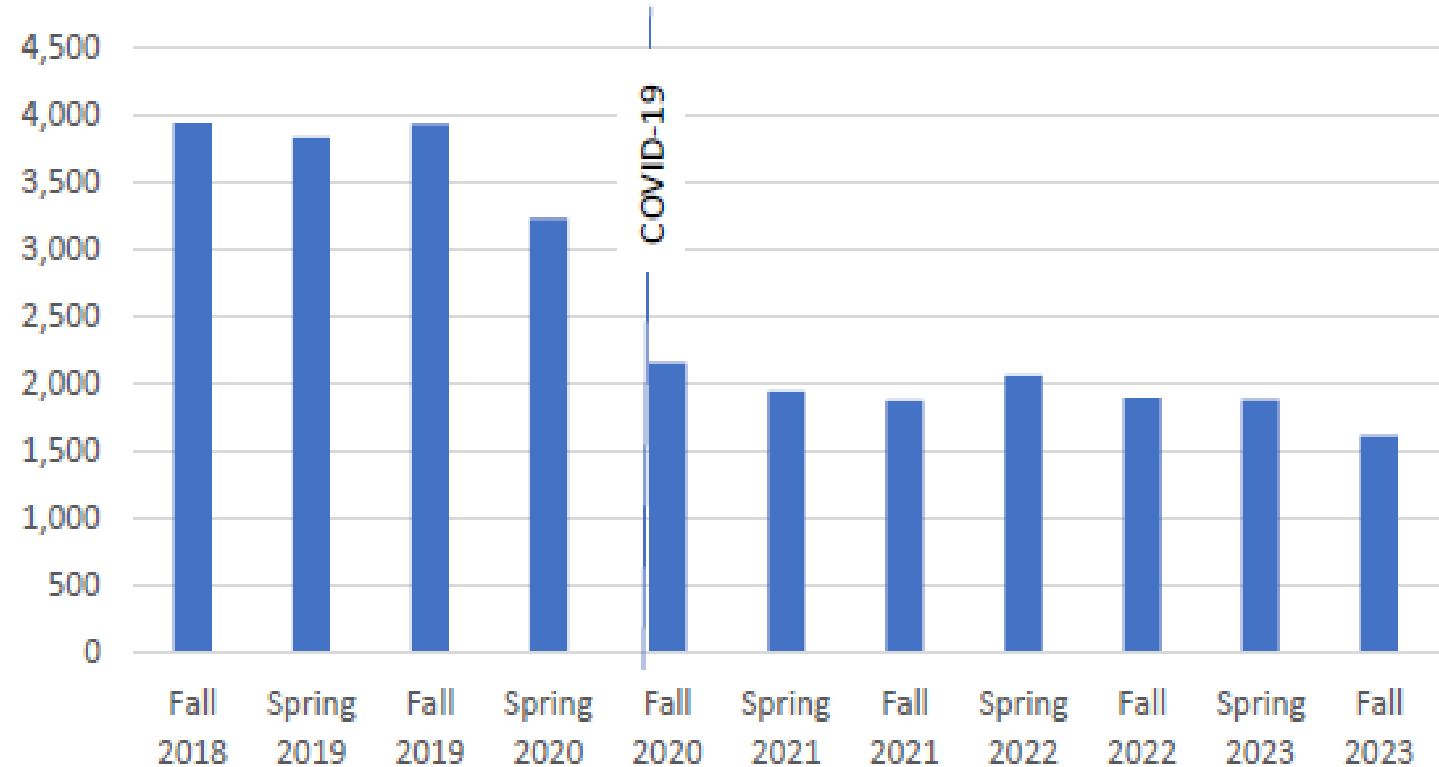
Source: CUNY demographics file analyzed by OER.

- CUNY EDGE participants are by definition very low income, given CA eligibility requirements.
- Staff estimate that approximately 35-50% of students are parents.
- 20% of students are also enrolled in CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP), which provides similar supports.
- Nearly 60% of EDGE participants in our sample were pursuing Associate degrees, with most of the rest enrolled in Bachelor's programs.

The steep decline in overall EDGE enrollment starting Fall 2020 reflects CA's shift from mandatory to voluntary engagement.

- Outreach strategies include tailored communications to students on CA, referrals from other departments, and presence at campus events.
- On average, students were on the EDGE caseload for 51.2% of the time they were enrolled in CUNY.
 - Just under one-third of students were EDGE participants for the entire time they were enrolled at CUNY.
 - Time spent at CUNY but not on EDGE could reflect time when the student was not on the CA caseload, and thus not EDGE eligible.

Fig 1. EDGE Caseload by Semester: Fall 2018 – Fall 2023



In contrast to the steep drop in EDGE enrollment, engagement patterns changed only modestly.

Level of EDGE engagement by Student-Semester, Fall 2018-Fall 2023

	Before COVID		After COVID	
	Number (n=14,922)	Percent	Number (n=13,378)	Percent
Minimally Engaged (One engagement)	3,181	21.3%	3,371	25.2%
Moderately Engaged (2-6 engagements)	8,073	54.1%	6,196	46.3%
Highly Engaged (6+ engagements)	3,668	24.6%	3,811	28.5%

Source: CUNY EDGE participation file analyzed by OER.

- Engagement levels were generally similar across institution type and by degree pursued.
- Staff reported that engagement could be driven by:
 - Academic motivation / struggles
 - CA case issues
 - Year in school

CUNY EDGE participation is associated with small but statistically significant improvements in academic performance.

- Students attempted more credits (10.9 vs. 10.3) and had higher current semester GPAs (2.52 compared to 2.47) in semesters when they enrolled in EDGE compared to semesters when they did not.
- More engaged students achieved modestly higher current and cumulative GPAs.
 - This may reflect a self-selection effect as well as the impact of EDGE supports.

	Highly Engaged (n=7,479)	Moderately Engaged (n=14,269)	Minimally Engaged (n=6,552)	<u>Not Enrolled in EDGE</u> (n=25,353)
Attempted Credits				
Average	10.8	10.9	10.9	10.3
Median	12.0	12.0	12.0	12.0
Current Semester GPA				
Average	2.68	2.51	2.38	2.47
Median	3.05	2.93	2.83	2.93
Cumulative GPA				
Average	2.79	2.68	2.60	2.69
Median	2.94	2.87	2.82	2.89

Source: CUNY credit accumulation and GPA file analyzed by OER.

Bolded numbers indicate statistically significant differences.

Across the full study period, just under 50% of EDGE participants (n=4,986) earned at least one degree.

	Before COVID		After COVID	
	Number (n=2,047)	Percent	Number (n=3,989)	Percent
Associates degree	1,327	64.8%	1,972	49.4%
Bachelor's degree	697	34.0%	1,902	47.7%
Graduate degree	6	0.3%	88	2.2%
Certificate	17	0.8%	27	0.7%

Source: CUNY degree conferrals file analyzed by OER.

- The majority of degrees awarded to EDGE students were associate degrees, though the proportion of bachelor's degrees increased in the post-COVID period.
- The proportion of degrees by institution type generally reflected their share of the EDGE caseload.

A preliminary analysis of three-year graduation rates for EDGE participants pursuing associates degrees suggests the program may have a modest positive effect.

	Number Graduating	Graduation Rate
EDGE Cohort Enrolling Fall 2018 – Fall 2020 (n=1,732)	487	28.1%
CUNY Cohort Enrolling (Fall 2016 (n=21,906)	<i>Not published</i>	24.2%

Source: EDGE data from CUNY degree conferral file analyzed by OER. Overall CUNY graduation rate published by CUNY Office of Institutional Research Assessment (May 2020), “System Retention and Graduation Rates of Full-Time First-time Freshmen in Associate Programs by Year of Entry, 2009-2018.”

- Among a cohort of first-time freshman pursuing associate degrees full-time who initially enrolled in CUNY EDGE between Fall 2018-Fall 2020 (n=1,732), the three-year graduation rate was 28.1%.
- Published CUNY data shows an overall three-year graduation rate of 24.2% for full-time first-time freshmen enrolled in Fall 2016 (the most recent year available).
- While rates are not directly comparable, this suggests CUNY EDGE is providing valuable support to a particularly high-need student population.

Conclusions and Next Steps

- The CUNY EDGE program provides holistic support that encompasses not only academic and career services, but also addresses a wide range of personal needs among a vulnerable very low-income population.
- Approximately three-fourths of EDGE students are moderately or highly engaged with the program, seeking out resources beyond completion of a school letter for HRA.
- CUNY EDGE shows promising signs of improving educational outcomes for participants, but more rigorous research is needed.
- Next steps could include analysis of matched datasets across CUNY, HRA, and NYS Department of Labor to explore the relationship between EDGE participation / engagement and educational and labor market outcomes.