

## **Care Off-Campus: How Supporting Students' Basic Needs Creates Scholars**

**By Holliday Senquiz, Guttman Community College**

When we envision a better CUNY and think about supporting college students, we often first consider their campus needs. However, we must remember, students are more than just students. They have lives off campus as well. They are individuals with the same basic needs as everyone else, such as food, housing, bills, etc. Oftentimes, those needs are not met. Here are the facts: [According to a study conducted in 2019, 36% of college students are food insecure](#). This means they do not have consistent access to food, often cutting the size of or skipping meals entirely as a result. Additionally, [a different study from 2017 found that 51% of students had faced housing insecurity](#), meaning they were unable to pay rent, were forced to move in with others, or were without housing entirely. There are more low-income college students enrolled than there were before, with one study reporting [the total share of undergraduate, low-income college students increased from 12% in 1996 to 20% in 2016](#). It's important to keep in mind that New York, where all schools within the CUNY system are located, [had the 5th highest cost of living index compared to the entire nation in 2022](#). New York's uniquely high cost of living can exacerbate students' difficulty in meeting their basic needs. The fact that college students are struggling in this manner is problematic for many reasons, but there's one reason in particular that colleges should be concerned about.

Students cannot prioritize their education if their basic needs are not being met. If colleges and universities want students to do well in school, such as graduating on time, participating in extracurriculars and honors programs, etc., then they must eliminate outside factors that will inhibit their success such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, and economic instability. One of the studies from earlier reads, "The stress associated with housing instability and food insecurity negatively impacts daily life for low-income college students. The inability to meet basic needs has adverse consequences for their psychosocial outcomes and educational attainment including college completion, academic performance, concentration in class, class attendance..." ("Many College Students Struggle to Have Their Basic Needs Met", Harmony Reppond, Ph.D.)

Thus, CUNY should offer assistance and resources to ensure that students are able to basic needs. But what does that look like? Is that even possible? Well, meet Dana LePage. Dana is the Associate Director of the Connect Center at Guttman Community College. The Connect Center provides resources, referrals, and support to address student's essential needs including access to food, financial stability, housing

insecurity, immigration assistance, and more. The Connect Center is a great example of how supporting student needs is entirely possible in postsecondary education!

I interviewed Dana to learn more about the Connect Center: how it works, and how it's successful. Here are some of her responses:

**What basic needs does the Connect Center help meet?**

*“Food, financial, legal, immigration, childcare, housing, tax assistance, and more.”*

**Do you think the Connect Center's services have a positive impact on students' well-being?**

*“The Connect Center provides very important stress relief when students are unsure of how they will be able to pay a bill or have enough food at home for themselves or their family members. All of our services are completely free to students so they don't have to worry about paying back loans, etc. Some programs don't even have an application process so it is easy and quick to get access to essential needs. Students can also feel less alone when these programs are normalized and they see their peers partaking as well.”*

**How does supporting students' basic needs improve their time at college?**

*“Supporting students' essential needs allows them to focus more on their academics instead of worrying that they will not have enough food at home, or how they will pay their rent... Now more than ever it is difficult to pay for rent and utilities, on top of food and college tuition. That is why the Connect Center and the services we offer are so vital.”*

So, how can this resource be improved upon and replicated CUNY-wide?

**What steps would individual schools or CUNY as a whole have to take in order to replicate the Connect Center model?**

*“Most of the other CUNY schools, if not all, have Food Pantries on their campus, which is a great first step. But not all have an actual physical center with full staff who are there to meet 1:1 with students who need help with housing, food, legal issues, etc. Administration at these schools would need to understand how important essential needs are and how much they impact CUNY students.”*

### **What could CUNY do to improve Guttman's own Connect Center?**

*“Providing specific funds to us that do not have to be raised through grants would be incredibly helpful. We can also use additional money to be able to support our student needs better. Longer term, in an ideal world, it would be wonderful to provide low-cost housing options through CUNY for our students as well as a childcare center for those students who are caring for children while they are trying to finish their degrees.”*

Overall, students need support in meeting their basic needs. If their needs go unmet, they are unable to prioritize their education and reach their full potential. CUNY schools should offer resources to help students meet their basic needs. This work is already being done to some extent thanks to people like Dana at Guttman's Connect Center, so we know it's possible. We need more schools to adopt the methodology of the Connect Center and more funds need to be made available to make it happen. This is one way we can make CUNY better.

## Sources (MLA Format):

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## Unedited Questions and Answers from Interview:

- 1. How did you begin working at the Connect Center, and how long have you been there now?**

I began working in the Connect Center in September 2021, so I will have been here almost 3 years. I had previously worked at BMCC and wanted to get back into higher education. As a social worker, overseeing the Connect Center was something I was very interested in, to help students to have access to essential needs.

- 2. What does the Connect Center do? Describe your everyday day-to-day.**

The Connect Center provides a variety of free services and programs for students who need some support with their basic needs. We have food programs, emergency grants, immigrant student support, referrals to legal, housing, and childcare agencies. The day to day includes administration work, planning programs, meeting with students, overseeing the Pantry, helping students determine eligibility for SNAP, attending meetings, handing out fresh produce, and hosting workshops.

- 3. What basic needs does the Connect Center help meet?**

Food, financial, legal, immigration, childcare, housing, tax assistance, and more.

- 4. Do you think the Connect Center’s services have a positive impact on students’ well-being?**

The Connect Center provides very important stress relief when students are unsure of how they will be able to pay a bill or have enough food at home for themselves or their family members. All of our services are completely free to students so they don't have to worry about paying back loans, etc. Some programs don't even have an application process so it is easy and quick to get access to essential needs. Student can also feel less alone when these programs are normalized and they see their peers partaking as well.

**5. How does supporting students' basic needs improve their time at college?**

Supporting students essential needs allows them to focus more on their academics instead of worrying that they will not have enough food at home, or how they will pay their rent. In NYC it is clear that expenses are high and the Pandemic associated lay-offs, etc. certainly impacted our students and their families in regards to income and savings. Now more than ever it is difficult to pay for rent and utilities, on top of food and college tuition. That is why the Connect Center and the services we offer are so vital.

**6. Do you think other schools within the CUNY system should offer their own resources similar to what the Connect Center does? What steps would individual schools or CUNY as a whole have to take in order to make that a reality?**

Most of the other CUNY school, if not all, have Food Pantries on their campus, which is a great first step. But not all have an actual physical center with full staff who are there to meet 1:1 with students who need help with housing, food, legal issues, etc. Administration at these schools would need to understand how important essential needs are and how much they impact CUNY students.

**7. What could CUNY do to improve Guttman's own Connect Center?**

Providing specific funds to us that do not have to be raised through grants would be incredibly helpful. We can also use additional money to be able to support our student needs better. Longer term, in an ideal world, it would be wonderful to provide low-cost housing options through CUNY for our students as well as a childcare center for those students who are caring for children while they are trying to finish their degrees.

**More Info:**

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