



Increasing Retention Rates of CUNY Freshmen through Comprehensive Mental Health Services

Group 3

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Table of Contents

01

Public Health Issue

Why is it an Issue?
Priority Group

02

Comparison

Retention Rate Trends
Other Statistics

03

Targeted Behaviors

04

Intervention Plan

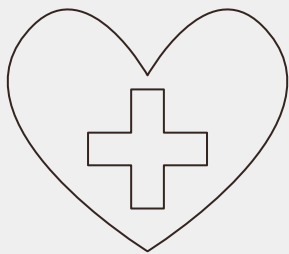
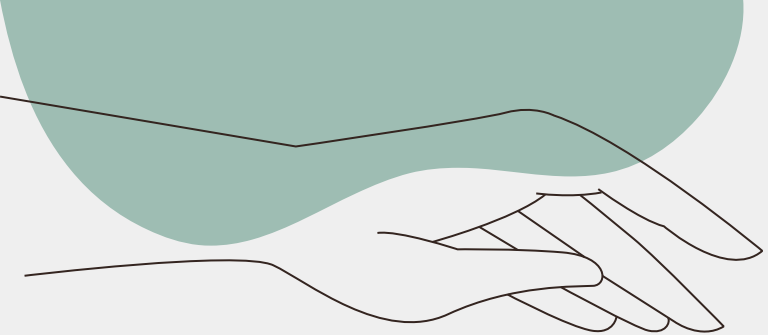
Stakeholders & Interventions
Financials & Awareness

05

Evaluating Outcomes

06

Limitations & Barriers



01

Why is it a Public Health Issue?



The Public Health Issue with Retention Rates

1. Disease Burden and Impact

- Mental health challenges are a key driver of retention issues, directly contributing to rising dropout rates.
- A prospective cohort study following individuals from age 5-27 found that dropouts were up to 4x more likely to experience poor health, unemployment, criminal justice involvement, and reliance on public assistance by age 27.
 - For individuals of low-SES the risk was even greater

2. Quality of Life: Dropouts vs. Bachelor's Degree

- **Lifetime earnings:** Dropouts earn ~50% less leading to financial instability and barriers to resources
- **Shorter life expectancy:** 75 years old vs. 83 years old
- **Mental Health:** Dropouts are almost 2x as likely to have depression at age 40 (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 26 years)

3. Emergence of Disease

- A 2022 meta-analysis of over 100,000 college students found that rates of depression and anxiety increased from 33.6% and 39.0% pre-COVID to 35.9% and 40.7% post-COVID, respectively.

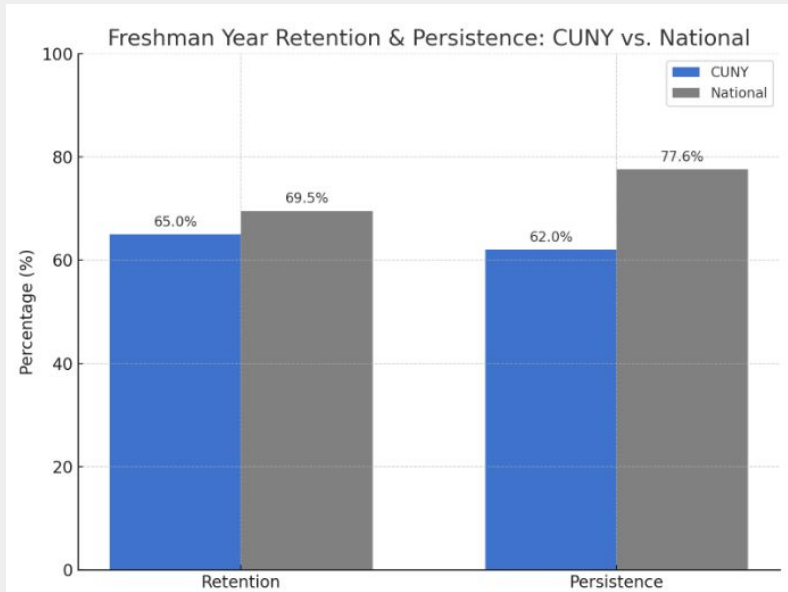
4. Community Impact

- CUNY students perform below the national average in both retention and persistence (see chart on next slide).
- Students from low SES and diverse cultural backgrounds who complete their education are more likely to work in and support at risk communities.

Why CUNY Students?

Retention: The percentage freshmen who return to the *same institution* for their second fall semester.

Persistence: The percentage of freshmen who are still enrolled *anywhere* one year later.



On average, CUNY students face **higher risks** due to factors such as socioeconomic status, first-generation college attendance, and diverse cultural backgrounds.

Improving retention rates among CUNY students not only benefits these **individuals** but could also create significant **ripple effects** in at-risk communities, as graduates are more likely to work in and support those communities, helping to reduce disparities and challenges over time.

The Priority Group

CUNY Freshman from low socioeconomic status (SES), first-generation college attendees, and diverse cultural backgrounds.

1. Elevated Risk: Why This Group is Vulnerable

- **Low SES:** 57% of CUNY undergrads receive Pell grants vs. 34% nationally, indicating a higher level of low SES students
- **First Generation (FG):** 60% of CUNY students are FG vs. the national estimate of 54-56%
- **Cultural Diversity:** 38% of CUNY students have a native language other than english vs. the national average of 22%

2. Behavioral and Structural Barriers to Care

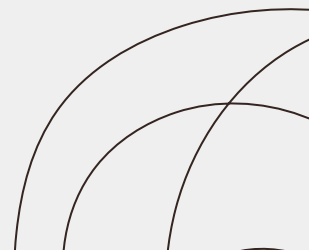
- A prospective cohort study of at-risk students in the urban Atlanta region found **social support** and **on-campus housing** were the greatest protective factors against dropout.
- CUNY students are more likely to commute, hold jobs outside of school, and lack strong support systems.
- Cultural and language barriers may prevent students from engaging with mental health services as well

3. Impact

- This group's mental health burden not only affects academic success but also long-term well-being, economic stability, and community health outcomes.
- CUNY students experience **higher levels of mental health challenges** such as depression, anxiety, and stress compared to national college student averages.



02 Comparison



The Impact of Mental Health on CUNY Freshman Retention

- A study of nearly 10,000 college students found that those with **higher levels of depression, stressful life events, or antisocial behaviors were more likely to drop out** after their first semester.
- They also found that protective factors like social support and living on campus reduced this risk. These findings show how **mental health challenges directly affect retention**, which is why addressing them early is so important (Thomas et al. , 2021).



of students suffer from anxiety disorders and more than 18% of CUNY undergraduates suffer from depression



of students 18-25 and 6.4% of those 26 and older had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year



of CUNY students with symptoms of depression, anxiety disorders or serious psychological distress have not visited a campus mental health center in the last 12 months

CUNY Freshman Retention Rates

- Another study analyzed CUNY retention rates from Fall 2014 to Fall 2022 and found that retention rates for full-time, bachelor's degree-seeking freshmen **dropped by 7%** between 2017 and 2021.
- The 2019 freshman cohort saw a spike in retention, which is likely due to flexible pandemic-related policies, but this was followed by a decline in the following years, which may indicate ties to stressors from COVID-19 (Verzani, 2024).

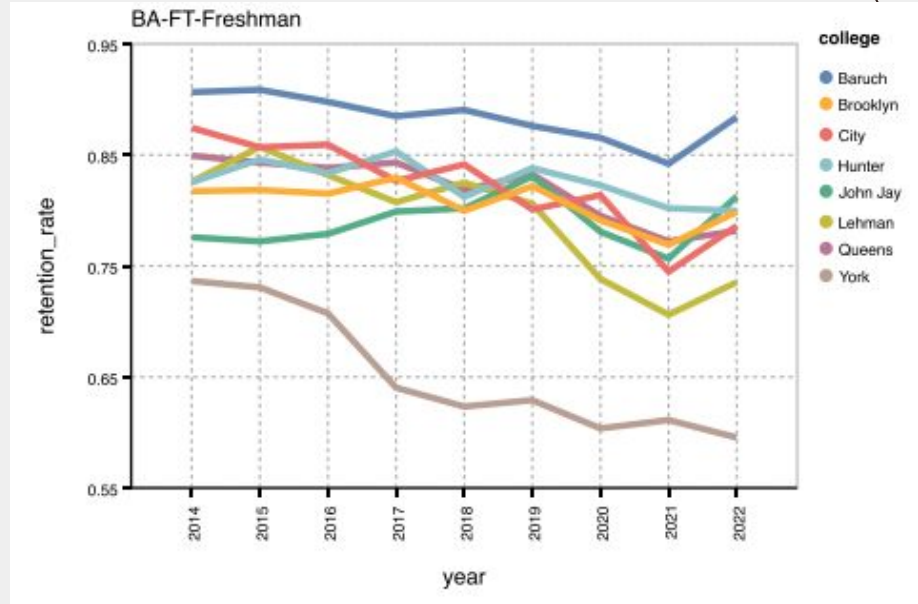


Figure 11: Graphic showing BA-FT-Freshman retention by senior college

CUNY Freshman Retention Rates

- The data also revealed that community college freshmen experienced declines similar to those at senior colleges, suggesting that this is a system-wide issue and not confined to a single type of institution (Verzani, 2024).

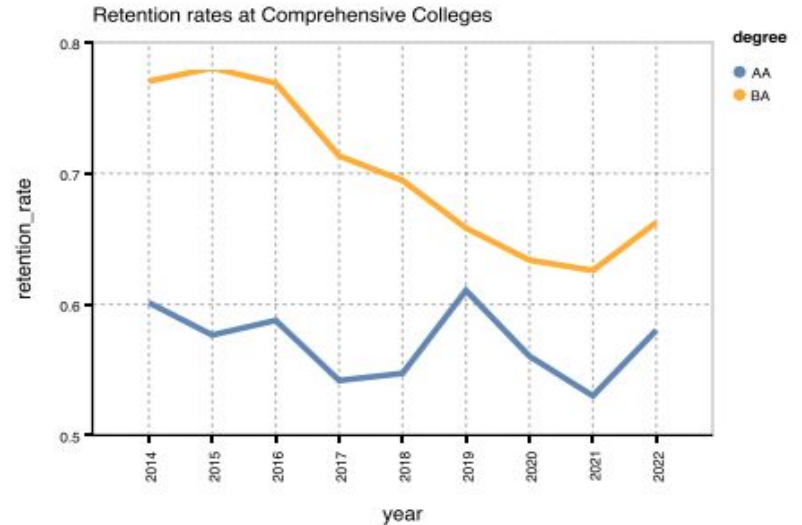


Figure 24: Aggregated retention rates at CUNY's comprehensive colleges

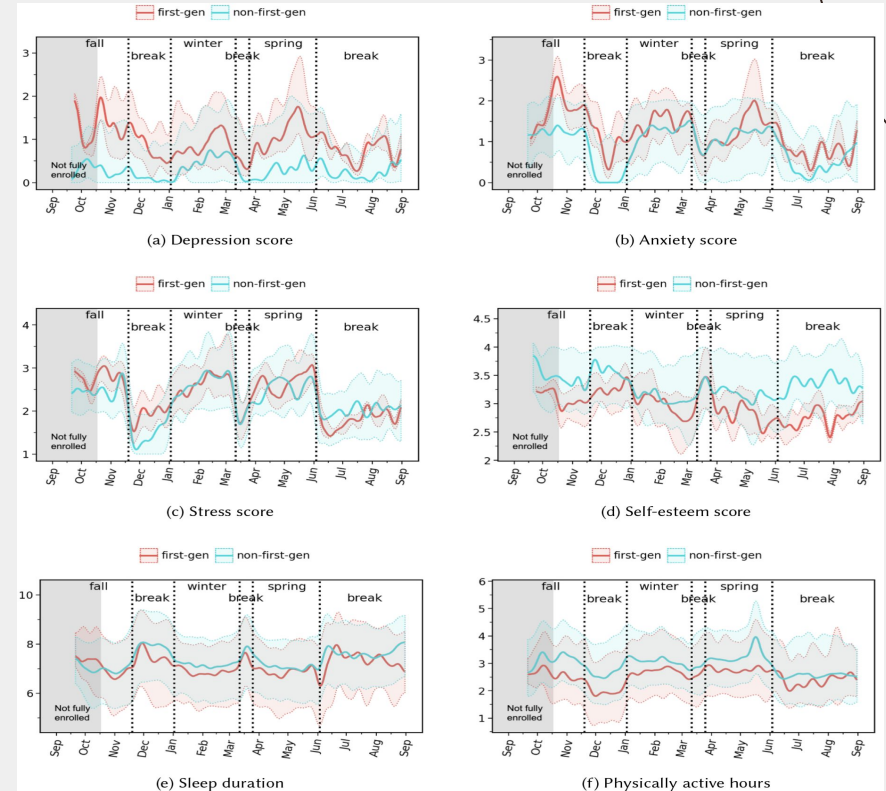
Figure 24: Aggregated retention rates at CUNY's comprehensive colleges

High Mental Health Risks Among First-Generation College Students

- A critical subgroup within the CUNY freshman population is first-generation college students, or FGCS. A study found that **FGCS face significantly higher mental health risks** compared to their peers.
- Many FGCS come from lower-income families, rely heavily on financial aid, and often work more hours to cover their expenses. This financial strain is a persistent source of stress and correlates with elevated rates of anxiety and depression.
- Moreover, FGCS report lower levels of social support from family and friends, reduced sense of belonging to their universities, and less overall life satisfaction.
- The study highlights that **FGCS are less likely than non-FGCS to seek help for mental or emotional problems**, not just from professionals, but also from peers and family. This reluctance to seek support can leave FGCS particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges, which in turn can undermine their academic persistence and success (Kalkbrenner & Flinn, 2024).

Retention Risks and Behavior Patterns in CUNY Freshmen

- A study at Dartmouth College found that FGCS are **71% more likely to drop out** during their first year compared to non-first-generation students (Wang et al., 2022).
- This higher attrition risk is linked to poor mental health, limited family support, and less social interaction.
- Although conducted at Dartmouth, these challenges are likely even greater at CUNY due to its diverse student body.
- **FGCS also reported significantly higher depression and anxiety levels, especially during their first semester**, with PHQ-4 scores showing the greatest difference in the fall term (Wang et al., 2022). This highlights the need for strong mental health support early in the academic year.





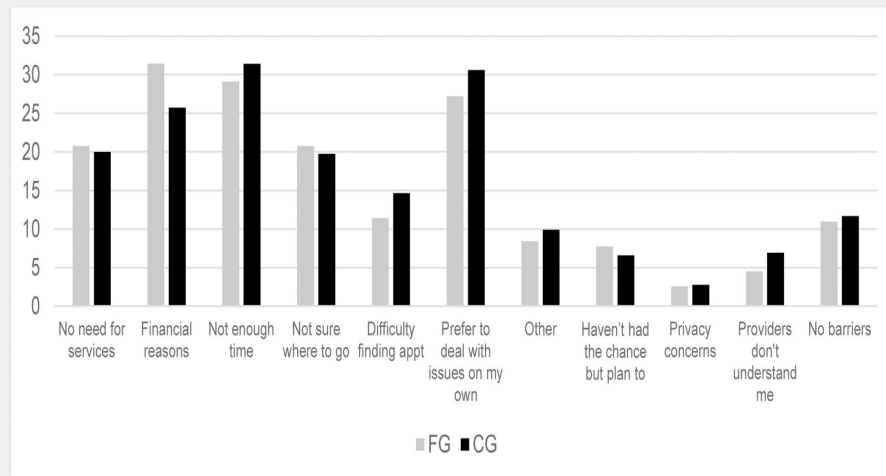
03



Targeted Behaviors

Targeting Low Engagement With Mental Health Resources

- Many CUNY freshman experience anxiety, depression, or PTSD but **41.1% do not seek care or are dissatisfied** with services (Sanborn et al., 2024)
- **First-gen students** face unique barriers; only **32.8% received therapy**, and **31.5% cited financial reasons** as the main obstacle (Lipson et al., 2023)



Targeting Low Engagement With Mental Health Resources

- Students may lack **mental health literacy**. They either don't know *when* to seek help, *where* to go, or *what's* available (Sanborn et al., 2024)
- Many students feel that services are **hard to access, not culturally sensitive, or not relevant to their needs** leading to dissatisfaction
- **Cultural stigma**, long commutes, packed schedules, and lack of personalized outreach worsen disengagement – especially among working or commuting students
- This behavior leads to **poor academic performance, higher dropout risk, and lower retention**

Targeting Low Engagement With Mental Health Resources

Why are Students Dissatisfied?

- Mental health services at CUNY may feel **fragmented, inconsistent, or too clinical** for students seeking supportive, peer-driven care
- Students report **long wait times, lack of follow-up**, or feeling that staff “don’t understand their background or stressors”
- **FGCS (first-gen college students)** especially feel **uncomfortable or judged** when disclosing mental health struggles, leading to avoidance
- Aulck et al. (2021) showed that students in **Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs)** reported significantly **higher retention, GPA, and satisfaction**, largely due to **social connection and emotional support**

Evidence-Based Intervention – FIG Model

Adapted for CUNY

- Aulck et al. (2021): **Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs)** significantly improved GPA, retention, and graduation, **especially in underrepresented students**
- Over **70% of participants** said **social support** and **peer connection** were the most valuable benefits
- We propose adapting FIGs at CUNY by embedding **peer mentoring, mental health education, and service navigation into Freshman Seminar courses**
- This structure allows **early outreach**, combats stigma, and connects students to services **before problems escalate**
- Build trust and access through **student-led guidance**, not just administrative counseling
- The intervention is **low-cost, scalable**, and directly addresses the **help-seeking barriers** unique to CUNY freshmen such as **community, clarity, and connection**.



04

Intervention Plan



Finding a Solution

- The significant decline in retention rates among CUNY freshmen can be attributed to the complex mental health challenges many students face, which hinder their ability to focus on academic success.
- Targeted interventions, such as **increased awareness, peer mentoring services, standardizing freshman seminars, and physical activity initiatives** are necessary to address these mental health concerns and support students in completing their educational goals.
- Efforts should include:
 - Using digital platforms to advertise the services offered
 - Collaborating with wellness and counseling programs
 - Outreach via word of mouth and during freshman orientation

Intervention: FIG Model for CUNY

Standardizing Awareness

- Many students with anxiety, depression, or PTSD do not utilize mental health services that are available or often times are dissatisfied with the services offered
- **Intervention:** Flyers, brochures, and pamphlets that cover when and how to seek help and which resources are available on all CUNY campuses

Increase Peer Mentoring

- Peer learning and peer mentoring usually has a positive and significant result for those that suffer with anxiety and stress
- **Intervention:** Match freshmen with upperclassmen based on similar interests, majors, and experiences with regular check-ins

Increase Work Study Opportunities

- Many FGCS come from families with significantly lower incomes and are more likely to rely on grants or loans, face more debt, subjectively feel more stressed financially and academically
- **Intervention:** Increase work study opportunities and offer mandatory workshops on budgeting and loan literacy

Intervention: FIG Model for CUNY

Standardizing Freshman Seminar Courses

- 20% to 30% of first-year (i.e., freshman) students seeking baccalaureate degrees do not return for a second year of schooling
- **Intervention:** Make freshman seminar courses standardized across all CUNY campuses by automatically enrolling them during registration

Physical Activity for Mental Well-Being

- Many CUNY students work part-time or full-time, commute long hours, and juggle family obligations, all of which limit time and access to health-promoting behaviors like physical activity
- Participation in physical activity has been shown to prevent poor mental health and enhance retention rates
 - **Intervention:** Embed 4–8 week movement-based mental health tracks into CUNY Start, ASAP, or first-year seminar programs.

Stakeholders

CUNY Services

- **CUNY Administration:** Can expand mental health programs, mandate minimum service standards across campuses, and monitor retention and wellness metrics.
- **CUNY Wellness & Counseling Programs:** Offer targeted programming for freshman, integrate mental health screenings, provide workshops on stress management, transition anxiety, and academic pressure.
- **CUNY Faculty and Academic Advisors:** Receive training on mental health aid, incorporate wellness checks in early coursework, identify at-risk students through academic performance.

Government Officials

- **NYSED:** Provide grants specifically for mental health initiatives

Community Organizations

- **Non-Profit Mental Health Organizations:** Organizations such as NAMI NYC & NYC 988 can partner with CUNY to offer workshops, on campus clinical services or telehealth options. They can also help train campus counselors and peer leaders.

Financial Requirements

Budgeting

- **Counseling & wellness space:** Funding for utilities
- **Technology & software:** Costs for managing online screening tools and mental health wellness apps
- **Marketing/communication:** Costs associated with social media managers and graphic designs
- **Events/campaigns:** Funding for campus events to raise awareness on mental health

Staff

- **Licensed mental health counselors:** To offer counseling services, provide crisis intervention, and refer students to long term care
- **Peer support coordinators:** To manage and coordinate mental health related events and campus campaigns, and conduct peer to peer outreach
- **Administrative staff:** To track metrics related to retention rates, and outcomes of these services
- **Community workers/volunteers:** To contribute to educating students on mental health wellness
- **Healthcare providers:** To provide students with mental health treatment and counseling

Estimated Cost: ~\$57 per student x ~40,000 freshmen per year = ~**\$2.3 million**

Funding Source

1. **CUNY Institutional Funds**

- Office of Academic or Student Affairs can allocate budgets to hiring part time counselors or promoting mental health awareness campaigns.
- Utilizing CUNY Cares to reach out to students who may be eligible for mental health services.

2. **Government Grants**

- Funding from the U.S. Department of Education and SAMHSA can initiate mental health programs for high at risk student populations.

3. **Philanthropic Foundations**

- Fundraising campaigns around the school can spread awareness and encourage students to reach out for help.
- Foundations can support funding for wellness programs across CUNY campuses.

Awareness

Campus Wide Campaigns

- Can include utilizing social media, email newsletters, and multiple routine in-class visits from counselors to inform students about mental health services.
- Include mental health resources as a component of freshman orientation programs.
- Peer or faculty led support groups and targeted advising to advocate for the importance of focusing on one's mental health and identifying at risk students.
- Encourage use of anonymous online mental health screenings and apps provided by CUNY.
- Host mental health awareness events and workshops to increase engagement in these services.

Community Engagement

- Utilizing non-profit mental health organizations to communicate with students and their families.



05

Evaluating Outcomes

Measuring Success - What Data to Collect?

1. Freshman Retention Rates

- If interventions work, we expect to see increased retention rates

2. Utilization of Services

- Measures Engagement with Interventions (Low vs. High Usage? Useful? Accessible?)
- Increase Awareness?

3. Mental Health Status Screenings (& Pre/Post Intervention)

- PHQ-9/4 (Depression)
- GAD-7 (Anxiety)
- Compare & Contrast

4. Student Satisfaction with Services

- Assess Quality of Services
- Feedback
- Any Improvements to be Made?

PHQ-9

Name: _____ Date: _____

PHQ-9
Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?
Circle the most appropriate number for each.

	Not at all	Several Days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1 Little interest or pleasure in doing things	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
2 Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
3 Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
4 Feeling tired or having little energy	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
5 Poor appetite or overeating	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
6 Feeling bad about yourself - or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
7 Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
8 Moving or speaking slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite - being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual.	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
9 Thoughts that you would be better off dead or hurting yourself in some way	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
PHQ-9 Total Score:				

GAD-7

Over the past 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?
Circle the most appropriate number for each.

	Not at all	Several days	Over half the days	Nearly every day
1 Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
2 Not being able to stop or control worrying	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
3 Worrying too much about different things	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
4 Trouble relaxing	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
5 Being so restless that it's hard to sit still	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
6 Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
7 Feeling afraid	<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3
Total score for GAD-7:				

Measuring Success - Methods to Collect Data

1. Freshman Retention Rates

- Track CUNYfirst enrollment & disenrollment trends + Institutional Research reports

2. Utilization of Services

- Track Usage w/ Sign-In Sheets (Include Year/Demographics)
- Anonymous Surveys (Referred By? How Did You Find Us? Any Barriers?)

3. Mental Health Status Screenings (& Pre/Post Intervention)

- Integrate PHQ-9/4 & GAD-7 screening into Freshman Orientation Checklist
- Dartmouth's StudentLife App → Integration into CUNYfirst or Brightspace (Pulse)?

4. Student Satisfaction with Services

- Surveys
- Focused Groups/Interviews



Institutional Research Example

Proposal Idea

CUNY tracks that students leave, but why?

We can incorporate an exit survey that allows us to receive input from students who disenroll or withdraws from the college.

This can help us identify and target preventable causes of attrition like:

- Mental Health Stress,
- Lack of Resources,
- Academic Pressure,
- Poor Staff,
- etc...

Facts | Demographics | Majors | Minors | Course FTE | Degrees Awarded | Cohort Outcomes | Graduate Admissions | Faculty

HUNTER COLLEGE FACTBOOK – ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Admission Type: First-time Freshmen | Full/Part-time: Full-time | Gender: (All) | Under-represented Minority (URM): (All) | Special Prog: (All)

COHORT OUTCOMES

Fall Cohort Admit Year	Cohort Base	4-Year Graduation Rate	6-Year Graduation Rate	8-Year Graduation Rate	1-Year Retention Rate	2-Year Retention Rate	3-Year Retention Rate	4-Year Retention Rate	5-Year Retention Rate
2010	1,740	23.7%	53.3%	57.2%	85.4%	73.7%	65.6%	37.0%	11.0%
2011	2,130	23.6%	51.9%	55.9%	86.5%	72.2%	64.3%	35.6%	11.3%
2012	1,924	27.6%	56.2%	60.4%	86.6%	73.5%	67.7%	36.2%	11.8%
2013	1,921	25.5%	57.2%	61.5%	86.1%	72.0%	67.5%	37.8%	11.5%
2014	2,038	27.3%	55.9%	59.2%	82.5%	69.9%	65.8%	35.4%	10.7%
2015	2,168	30.7%	57.7%	60.6%	84.6%	73.2%	67.1%	34.1%	11.0%
2016	2,193	32.8%	56.4%	59.0%	83.4%	69.4%	62.9%	28.6%	8.0%
2017	2,330	39.7%	61.0%		85.3%	72.8%	69.0%	26.1%	7.2%
2018	2,589	37.9%	56.9%		81.2%	72.2%	66.9%	23.3%	7.7%
2019	2,526	40.4%			83.6%	73.0%	63.7%	23.7%	10.1%
2020	2,593	37.4%			81.8%	67.4%	61.6%	25.1%	
2021	3,232				80.1%	71.4%	65.1%		
2022	3,066				80.0%	68.8%			
2023	3,118				77.5%				
2024	2,845								

Reporting based on Fall cohorts.



06 Limitations & Barriers



Limitations & Barriers

- 1. Low Voluntary Participation – Surveys/Screenings/Interviews**
 - Survey Fatigue
 - Low Engagement, Loss of Follow-Up
 - Skewed Data & Biases – Selection, Response
- 2. Confounding Factors**
 - Financial Strains, Commute Time, Family Responsibilities, Legal Status Issues
- 3. Uneven Implementation Across Campuses**
 - Limited Staff & Resources
 - Varied Fundings, Programs, Frameworks
 - Different Priorities
- 4. Data Privacy Concerns**
 - Mental Health Screenings for Students cannot be Mandated (FERPA)
 - Limits Data Collection & Long-Term Tracking
- 5. Mental Health Stigma**
 - First-Gen & Cultural Backgrounds
 - Limits Utilization & Response Rates to Surveys/Screenings/Etc...

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