



Getting Students to and Through College

As the only program in Eastern Connecticut dedicated solely to college access and retention for low income, minority students; Higher Edge is a leading voice in student advocacy and education equity.

Since 2016, 140 program participants have earned their college degree. Fifteen students are set to graduate in May 2024. This year's graduating class is small, but this is the group whose educational trajectory was disrupted by COVID. The group who was sent abruptly sent home, a salutation of "see you in two weeks" proved to be a lie. I know we want to put COVID behind us - we no longer need to quarantine when sick and the world presumably has retired to "normal", but the effects are still being felt by these students, OUR students.

Yet, the organization's students continue to persevere. In addition to earning their college diplomas; students are pursuing professional degrees. From law school at UCONN to medical school at Duke University and Quinnipiac. To Masters Programs in Social Work, Environmental Engineering and Public Health. Moreover, in the last 2 years; three students have been appointed to positions on community Boards, including Higher Edge, New London Maritime Society and Elevate to Even Plus.

Persistence and retention remain at the forefront of Higher Edge's work. According to the United States Census Bureau's most recent findings (2022), more than 1 in 3 adults over the age of 25 has obtained a Bachelor's degree. Obtaining this degree often has different pathways for students, especially for those who are first generation college students. Unfortunately, it is unfathomable to imagine a time when an obstacle won't arise for the program's students. There are situations that extend far beyond the classroom, from navigating registration procedures and learning the role of campus offices to time management and financial literacy. One institutional policy can lead to a misstep or setback. It's difficult to stay on top of all that is occurring, while also attending classes, completing coursework/research, participating in a club/activity, and/or interning. Many Higher Edge students also take on additional responsibilities, such as working or taking care of a family member. However; through the use of



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preventative measures, advisors aim to alleviate such barriers. This starts with building rapport and maintaining positive relationships in which students feel respected and trust their advisor. Wilmalis Rodriguez, a senior at UCONN majoring in Environmental Engineering, said, *"Higher Edge has been a great support system that understands what college is like while also having the experience to talk me through it. They keep me on track with things that may get lost in the background of all that school is and make sure I have everything I need ... and this is for anything."* Year after year, Higher Edge students are persisting to their second, third and fourth year of college at rates higher than their counterparts, in spite of the hurdles and institutional hindrances. It is continued proof the organization's programming is effective and that graduating college **is** attainable. Of course not all Higher Edge students enroll in college or continue pursuing their educational goals. There are many factors for this, many of which have only been compounded by the pandemic and a stronger need for mental health support. So the questions to be asked remain: How do we keep students engaged? How do we understand their needs so greater layers of support can be built and sustained?

Higher Edge has always spotlighted its students - listing graduates, highlighting individual accomplishments, and capturing glimpses of their life on campus. These stories are evidence that college degrees are not only attainable, but they are attainable by their peers coming from similar backgrounds and facing similar challenges. More importantly; they are achieving something greater than a degree, qualities that cannot be captured on a piece of paper. Higher Edge students are also exploring the world, conducting research, presenting at national conferences and working alongside elected officials. All incredible moments ... for the students and community at large. A famous quote by Audrey Hepburn reads, *"Nothing is impossible, The word itself says 'I'm Possible'"* Day in and day out, Higher Edge students and alumni are proving these words true. They are creating a blueprint of success and laying the groundwork for students in the midst of college to follow. Let's work to ensure all students are meeting their capabilities