



Community Centers on NJ Campuses Developing a Consortium of Engage NJ Member Campuses

Why Work with Engage NJ

Engage NJ operates as a higher education presidents' coalition with its board made up of higher ed presidents and chief academic officers. This ensures that we deliver at the highest level of decision-making across all sectors of colleges and universities.

Entering its ninth year in operation, Engage NJ is the only business in New Jersey with cross-sector buy-in to graduating engaged citizens with 21st century transferrable workplace skills. Engage NJ is the only business that is delivering programs that connect civic engagement and workplace skills, including through our groundbreaking *Changebuilders* program, a consortium of six campuses and over one thousand students, and now in its second year of operation.

Engage NJ has operated in partnership and alliances with AmeriCorps, VISTA, the New Jersey Business and Industries Organization, New Jersey Department of State, and the New Jersey Coalition of County Colleges.

Finally, everything we design and deliver is actively and forthrightly built on the fundamental principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), including our **Community Center** model, designed to ensure that ALL students can participate because solid principles of DEI are in the fabric of its program design.

Why Advance a Community Center Model

Beginning in 2017, Dr. Saul Petersen, executive director of Engage NJ, began researching models for empowering students that would include dealing with food insecurity but not limit itself to that one barrier to success. Two successful operating models were tracked down and visited, one called Lula Bell's Resource Center at Davidson College and the other called Community Food Centres Canada. In both cases, it became clear that the stigma associated with hunger is real and needs to be strategically planned against its reinforcement in operational design (for reference please see sample research on stigma and food security in the appendix to this document). With these sources and principles, Dr. Petersen spent much of 2018 developing a model that would be suitable to a college campus, particularly a public institution with its significant numbers of commuters. This model was then brought to life through **funding from Robert Wood Johnson in 2018 as a \$25,000 seed grant** and was piloted at New Jersey City University.

The one-year pilot served to expand the mission of a traditional food pantry and implement a Community Center model of food and resource *touchpoints*. By '*touchpoints*' we mean the situations where clients, in this case university students on behalf of their families, decide to access nutrition and knowledge in a stigma-free and welcoming environment. The term '*community center*' is used to specifically focus on a diversity, equity and inclusion lens whereby placing community at the center is not only about access to nutrition and knowledge but also

about creating an environment where ALL people feel welcome, equal and empowered to determine their own path to success. Student need, and its potential association with stigma, is reversed in the tagline, “**In this community, we are ALL needed.**” The Community Center **mission**, as outlined on our website –

<https://www.njcampuscompact.org/community-center> -

is to be seen as a place where myriad support and resources are availed of in a stigma-free and welcoming environment for all. The **vision** is to value ALL people as equal and empowered to determine their own path to health and prosperity, and at the same time being inspired to engage in tackling community issues with their peers.

Engage NJ advances a comprehensive approach to student empowerment, rather than siloing efforts based on individual categories of ‘*need*’. In this way, we work to link students with resources that empower and give confidence, similar to those that are often taken for granted by people of privilege. Crucially though, this is done with a keen eye toward inclusivity, positivity, and self-accountability. These areas of comprehensive resource availability include the following examples:

- a. **Food Security** – Our largest focus of work is to ensure that students have access to free and healthy, nutritious food in a healthy environment. This includes the pantry and weekend backpack program, but also by ensuring systems such as SNAP and Swipe out Hunger are made available
- b. **Counseling and Mental Health** – We work with the Counseling Department to offer counseling services for students seeking conversations around mental health, both in group and individual sessions. This can be done cost effectively by working with graduate counseling students under the clinical supervision of a member of the faculty
- c. **Physical Education and Nutrition** – By developing partnerships with the Athletic Department, Health Sciences, Dining Services, and the DHHS, we offer workshops on life skills, nutrition, and more aimed at improving an understanding of healthy, cheap, and simple local food choices
- d. **Community** – In this area, we are celebrating multicultural free expression and performance so as to know one another better. A welcoming community feel is crucial to all community center spaces. This means a conscious removal of stigma-enhancing situations and setup, such as the removal of reference to the word "need", that is, unless staff and volunteers are referring to the fact that "all clients/students are needed". Students in the Community Center are invited to become active on campus in other volunteer and community engagement activities
- e. **Professional Clothing Rack** – Through the establishment of a room full of donated, new, professional clothing that is accessible and free to students, the opportunity is provided to enter into interviews, internships and other professional settings with confidence and the appropriate professional attire.

Why Work as a Consortium

Engage NJ has a long history of convening and developing and sharing useful practices for today’s purposes. For the purposes of this consortium of campuses that receive the grant and are

working within a Community Center model, there will be significant efficiency and return on investment by convening members of the consortium to:

- Discuss opportunities and challenges across different campuses within a similar program design
- Share replicable ideas and successes
- Learn of useful external partners and specific events that can be developed across the consortium
- Learn of different ways of engaging students and faculty in the community Center through various volunteer, service learning, or research projects

Opportunities for agreement and replication across the consortium include:

1. A tested set of steps to develop institutional buy-in for your resource center
2. Sample meeting agendas as you build out your leadership group
3. Guidance on reducing or eliminating traditionally sensitive or stigmatizing features of a pantry model
4. Guidance on branding and promoting your center to students
5. Sample center flyers and other branding materials
6. Guidance on developing an online student/client registration platform and intake survey
7. Guidance in building both internal and external partnerships that increase resource use for students but keep costs down
8. Guidance on developing a smart-phone-friendly Resource KIOSK, and how to make it available to students and faculty
9. Sample projects to be led by students at the center
10. Sample annual reports from Community Centers
11. Guidance on developing a weekend backpack program

Finally, a consortial approach will increase our collective opportunities for funding – both through state funding allocated to fighting campus hunger, and also through foundations interested in this comprehensive approach to student success.



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