



HRA and CUNY Help New Yorkers in Need Earn College Degrees

HRA and the City University of New York (CUNY) are working together to help public assistance clients earn their degrees and take their careers to the next level through the College Opportunity to Prepare for Employment (COPE) program, which offers services including counseling, tutoring, paid work study and assistance navigating the college system.

The Graduation Success Initiative (GSI), which is part of COPE, gives students who have already earned college credits more targeted and intensive assistance to help them earn their degrees in one year. On Tuesday, June 28, 48 students from the GSI initiative at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) graduated with Associates degrees in the arts and sciences, 14 graduated with honors. The majority of them will be going on to earn a Bachelor’s degree starting this fall.



*HRA Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Education Services
 Annika Holder*

“On behalf of Commissioner Steven Banks I’d like to say congratulations. Tomorrow is a new day filled with many possibilities,” said HRA Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Education Services Annika Holder. “As a CUNY graduate myself, I understand the power of the CUNY degree. I encourage you all to continue your education, and if you choose to, we have supports in place to help you pursue your goals.”

Several grads shared their stories with HRA:

Jonathan Dominguez, Computer Networking Major

“I had a great first semester at College of Staten Island—then I dropped out. A year later, I came to the GSI program. I was scared at first that I didn’t have the GPA, but I tried my hardest, and fast forward one year I’m graduating with honors and will be attending Hunter College in the fall to study Computer Science. I can’t wait, it’s an exciting field. Through the program I was able to find out what I’m passionate about, and



Jonathan Dominguez, Computer Networking



Amber Joseph, Human Services

they helped me every step of the way.”

Amber Joseph, Human Services Major

“I flunked out one semester. I wasn’t going to come back until GSI contacted me. I liked the weekly seminar—I felt more focused like that, and they let me come in and see my advisor once a week. The book voucher was also very helpful.”

“I grew up in foster care. I’ve seen the bad and the good, and I studied Human Services because I think I have a lot to give to the system. I definitely want to be a social worker. This fall I’m going to Lehman College to study Social Work, and I’m going to study until I get my Master’s.”

Venus Rivera, Computer Networking Major

“My sister went through the GSI program before me, and I saw how it motivated her. I’d been struggling, thinking I needed to come back to school, and I saw how the program was able to help her—and now here I am, graduated!”

“I’m already enrolled in City Tech. I’d like to get into computer security—I’d like a job that’ll give me stability and let me take care of my family.”



Venus Rivera, Computer Networking

Cesar Perez, Communications Major

“The GSI program contacted me after my first semester. They told me about the benefits, and I found out it was very helpful to people who had been there previously. Every time I needed help, they were there for me. I learned a lot about communications not only in the classroom, but from the GSI program as well. Those people gave the best of themselves.”

“This program helps people reach their full potential, and it helps them develop a sense of community. We have a chance to share our personal struggles with each other—that’s hard to find in college and in this city.”

Nicole Dempsey, Criminal Justice Major

“The program was amazing. [Support Services Counselor] Tommasina Faratro was my go-to person when I was stressed or when I was happy. It was wonderful. They push you—they’re there to give you the extra push to make sure you don’t give up.”



Cesar Perez, Communications

“I’m going to John Jay College in the fall. I know I’m going to major in Sociology, and I’m not sure what else, but I know I’m going to double-major. I want to help people in the corrections system who aren’t able to turn things around.”

About the Program

Programs like COPE and initiatives like GSI are examples of HRA’s program delivery strategy to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to employment and help New Yorkers in need find living wage jobs to break the cycle of poverty. By offering a diverse range of options and looking at each client’s individual skills, HRA can help more

clients find long-term financial independence and stability.

HRA’s Educational Services works closely with clients to help them select and enroll in identified education and training programs that align with their employment goals. Additional services include debt counseling and advisement, training-related supports, internships and other engagement activities.

To continue to promote and support graduation, HRA and CUNY have restructured the COPE program to include best practices of GSI. This will allow HRA to reach more students/clients and provide intensive services when they are needed to achieve graduation success.



Nicole Dempsey, Criminal Justice