

Mutual Aid in New York City: Student-led Aid and Efforts



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I. Introduction

After Covid-19 onset, mutual aid networks responded to neighborhood needs. The emergence of mutual aid has served as a means for timely responding to the needs of local community members. Mutual aid also often has supplemented the existing (more “professionalized,” institutional) networks of assistance by tapping into the resources of the city while localizing the layer of aid to specific community needs. Through this study, I will be focusing on college-campus mutual aid by conducting a case study of the 116th Initiative of Barnard College. By analyzing the organizing and mobilizing efforts of the 116th Initiative, I hope to examine the parallels between college campus mutual aid and neighborhood-based initiatives. Additionally, I aim to uncover a deeper connection between current mutual aid operations and the existing literature surrounding mutual aid, radical care, and collective action.

II. Research Question(s)

- How do student-led mutual aid efforts model other forms of neighborhood mutual aid networks, or how have they created a new strain of the larger mutual aid framework?
- How has the role of COVID-19 led to the formation of a mutual aid group on campus?

III. Research Scope

- This research is building on a 3-year study conducted by Dr. Mary Rocco, my mentor.
- The research focuses on college-campus mutual aid by conducting a case study of Barnard College’s mutual aid group, 116th Initiative (a connection made by my mentor and Barnard faculty, Dr. Rocco).

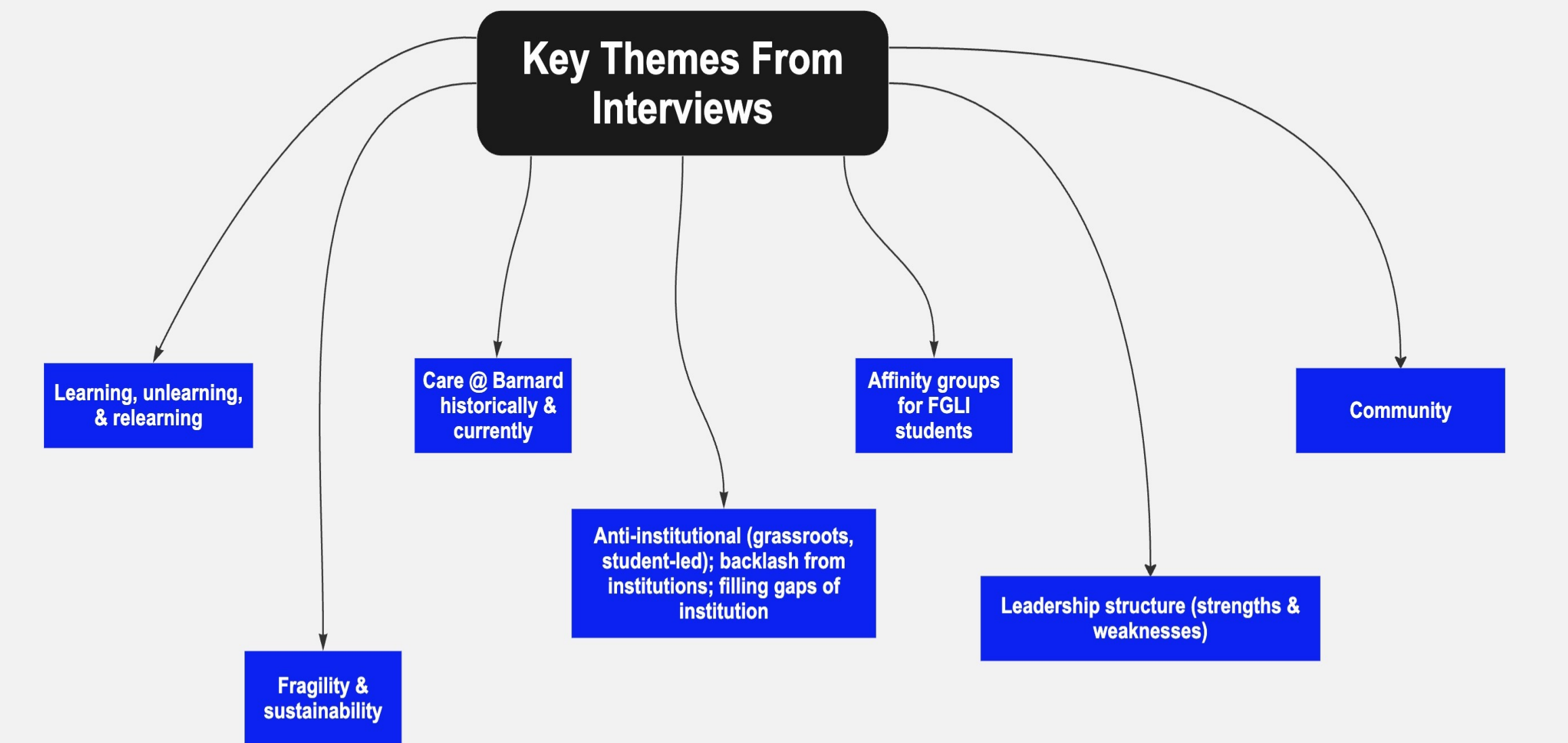
IV. Methods & Data Collection

- Formulating a case study through fieldwork, interviews, etc.
 - Mutual aid content tracking and analysis via websites, social media, and news reports
 - Site visit to Astoria Mutual Aid
 - Interviews with 116th Initiative’s organizers → Coded interviews
 - Content analysis of Barnard Zine archives
 - Extracting neighborhood & demographic data of Barnard, Morningside Heights & NYC
 - Content analysis of articles of 116th Initiative

VI. Literature Review

- Term **mutual aid** was first coined by Pyotr (Peter) Kropotkin (1902)
- Community organizing was seen after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. This included the “Occupy Sandy” relief efforts. Therefore, mutual aid is **not a “post-2020” awakening.** (Shepard & Burghardt, 2015).
- According to Spade (2020), the Black Panther Party “inspired many other organizations” to “build shared analysis of problems as collective rather than individual.”
- Mutual aid inflated due to inefficiencies within the system/institution. (Mould et al., 2022).
- **Continual transformation** of the mutual aid model vs **prescribed** model (Alonso & Samway, 2022).
- Breaking away from the **non-profit-industrial-complex** (NPIC) (Alonso & Samway, 2022).

VIII. Findings



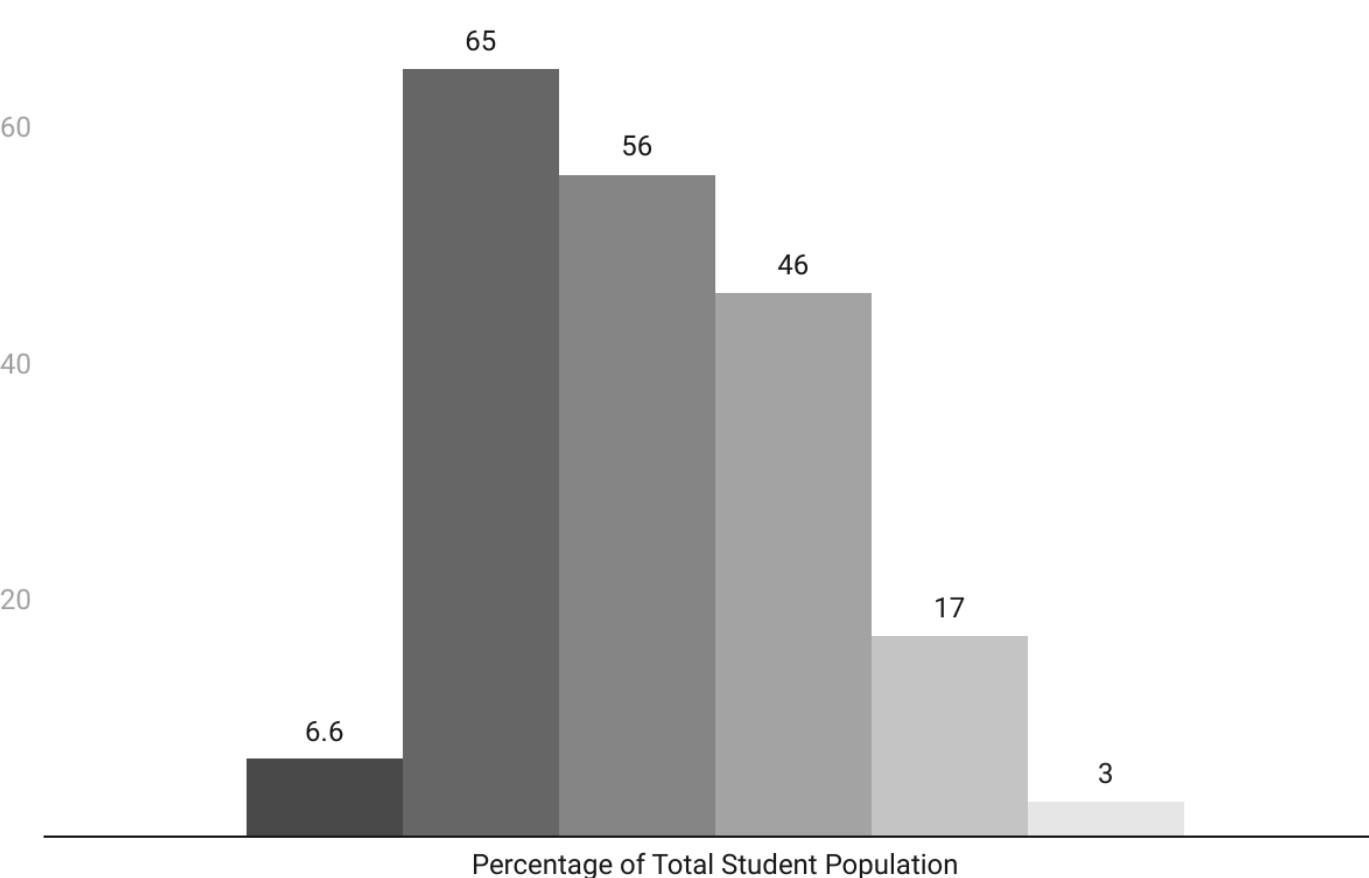
VII. Data Analysis

This data is the most recent finding on family income distribution of Barnard & Columbia students. The pandemic resulted in changes to the data reporting.

Barnard Student Population's Family Income Bracket

Figures measure Barnard's Class of 2013 Student Population

■ Bottom 20% ■ Top 20% ■ Top 10% ■ Top 5% ■ Top 1% ■ Top 0.1%

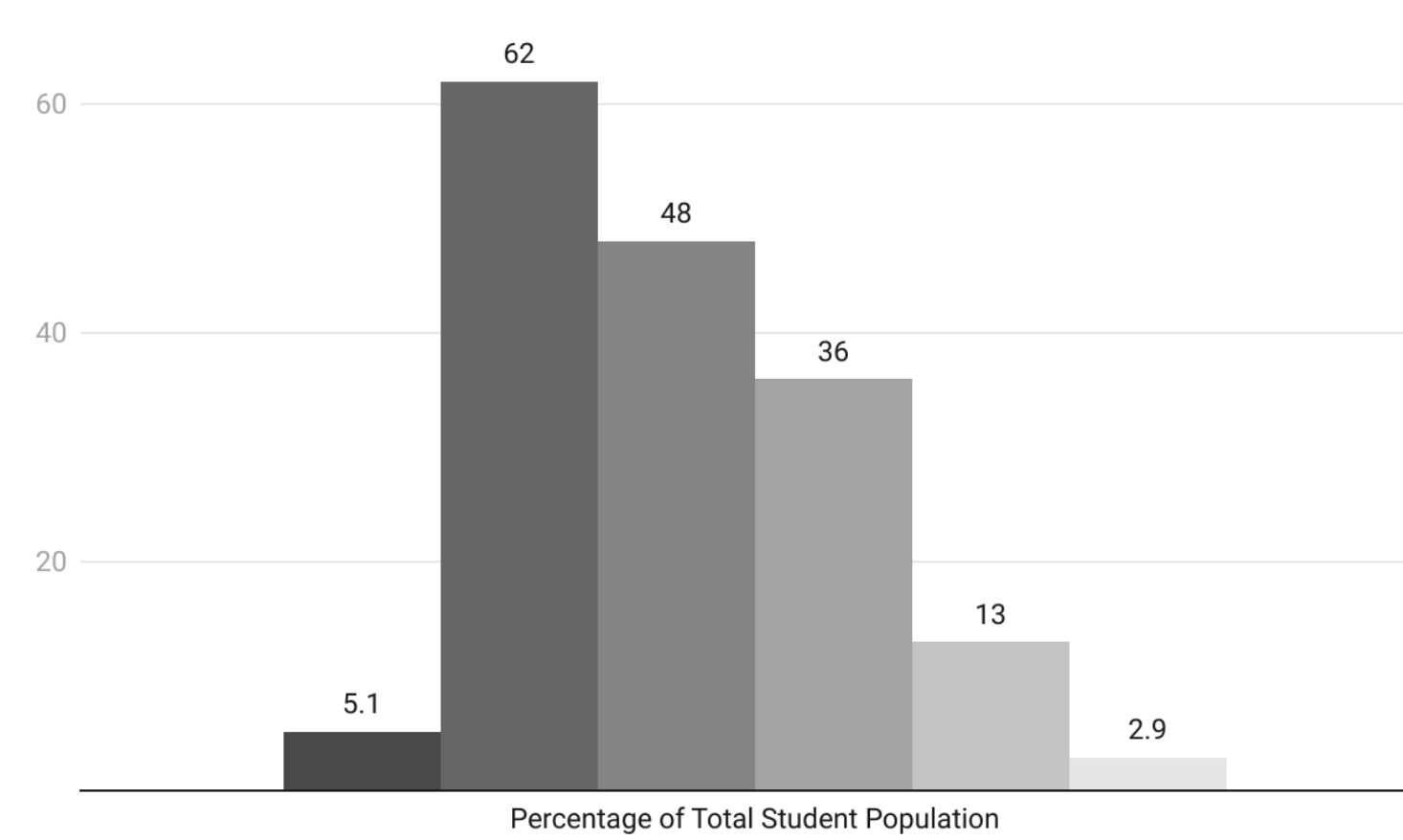


This data was published in 2017 by The New York Times
 Source: "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility", by Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner and Danny Yagan, The Equality of Opportunity Project • Created with Datawrapper

Columbia Student Population's Family Income Bracket

Figures measure Columbia's Class of 2013 Student Population

■ Bottom 20% ■ Top 20% ■ Top 10% ■ Top 5% ■ Top 1% ■ Top 0.1%



This data was published in 2017 by The New York Times
 Source: "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility", by Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner and Danny Yagan, The Equality of Opportunity Project • Created with Datawrapper

Interview Analysis:

Learning, unlearning, & relearning:

"But I think as we like, grow and learn the different ways that fundraising can occur, we get better each time, and we're able to raise more money or raise money in different ways that we haven't before, we haven't thought of before."
 (Menasha/Fern, organizer of 116th Initiative)

Leadership Structure:

"116th operates using horizontal means, having no clear "head" titles. This form of leadership is very "experimental" and believes that it does not function all the time."
 (Meinzer, volunteer of 116th Initiative)

Fragility:

"closed during the early portion of the school year, simply because" they "didn't have enough people running it" and many of the students felt "kind of...burnt out."
 (Kristen, organizer of 116th Initiative)

Grassroots-led & insistence on anti-institutional lens:

"that like, mutual aid is a leftist practice...based in grassroots practices...don't think it should...belong to any higher up or institution."
 (Kristen, organizer of 116th Initiative)

"It's for student by student."
 (Jaella, volunteer of 116th Initiative)

Astoria Mutual Aid's Free Store Wednesday Event

- On-site Observations:**
- Open 11 am to 3pm; 4pm to 8pm
 - Volunteers: sorting & hanging clothes, assisting shoppers
 - Store is open to everyone: everything is free! (Limit of 2 bags per person)
 - Volunteers not just from Astoria, also come from Long Island



Wall at Astoria Mutual Aid's community space
 Yoo, Yeeun. Photographer. Taken March 8th 2023.



Outside sign at Astoria Mutual Aid's community space
 Yoo, Yeeun. Photographer. Taken March 8th 2023.

Implications

- Major similarities to neighborhood based mutual aid groups & the existing literature
- Key differences point out the specific challenges of being a college aid mutual aid group/led by students
 - "We're college students, we have midterms, we're at an institution that's like supposed to be academically rigorous" (Kristen, organizer of 116th)
- Replication at other college campuses
- Barnard's culture of aid: notable alumni like Dean Spade, who has written books and informational guides on mutual aid, COVID-19 related zines to share resources to communities
- Reciprocal relationship between community members (ones attaining/benefitting from aid) & those organizing mutual aid → ensure sustainability in mutual aid efforts, center the efforts based on community needs → expand this movement of community-based care and support

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