Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, City University of New York

Innovations in American Government Award Case Study

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HARVARD Kennedy School
ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance and Innovation

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Foreword

Few issues require more urgent attention for city and state leaders than the need to increase economic mobility in order to help more Americans secure futures that include living wage jobs for themselves and their families. Large numbers of people fully capable of better jobs don't get better opportunities due to lack of realistic pathways that come with the necessary supports.

I first heard of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY) when I served Mayor Michael Bloomberg as deputy mayor. Yet it wasn't until March 2020 when the CUNY/ASAP leadership presented its approach and successes to the Innovations in American Government Award panel of judges that I fully realized its scope. At that point we heard about the creativity and importance of the model, which eventually was named winner of the 2020 Innovations in American Government Award.

Post-secondary education opportunities serve as important components of a journey to a better job. But these steps can be obscured by family or financial challenges and even a lack of confidence or understanding that a step forward will lead to a successful outcome. The ASAP program combines the best of education, advising, and access to broad support services to facilitate these steps forward. And it facilitates much of that support through carefully constructed peer groups.

This paper by Phil Jordan presents a summary of the key aspects of ASAP, which should help others interested in replication. The award triggered my own further set of interviews with program officials and participants, which will be part of my forthcoming book with Kate Coleman, *Growing Fairly*, to be published this fall by Brookings Institution Press.

–Stephen Goldsmith

Executive Summary

Social and economic mobility are at historic lows in America, while entrenched racial inequality continues to erect barriers.[1] Research suggests that education is critically important to enable economic mobility, particularly for the lowest-income populations, which are most frequently served by the patchwork of community colleges across the US.

While progress in expanding access and enrollment at community colleges over the past 20 years is significant, the rate of degree completion has generally not improved. Systemic barriers, including financial, social, and academic, persist. Three-year completion rates for associate degrees are very low, and there is a significant achievement gap for racial and ethnic minorities. Eliminating barriers to success is not easy and the community colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY) have not been immune to these challenges. However, while many programs attempt to overcome these obstacles, few have demonstrated verifiable success and none more so than CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP).

The three-year graduation rate from CUNY community colleges across New York City's five boroughs historically ranged from 6 to 11 percent prior to the mid-2000s. In 2007, with the support of NYC Opportunity (formerly the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity), the City University of New York (CUNY) launched Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) in order to significantly increase the timely degree completion rates of community college students. The program committed itself to more than doubling the three-year graduation rate of similar students at CUNY's then six community colleges. In 2007, only 24 percent of fully skills-proficient and 13 percent of all CUNY community college students graduated within three years. ASAP pledged to realize a graduation rate of at least 50 percent within the same time period. ASAP's extensive supports include financial resources (tuition waivers for students in receipt of financial aid with a gap need, textbook assistance, and New York City Transit MetroCards), and structured pathways to support academic momentum (full-time enrollment, block scheduled first-year courses, immediate and continuous enrollment in developmental education, winter and summer course-taking). ASAP also provides comprehensive direct support services (personalized advisement, tutoring, career development services, and early engagement opportunities to build a connected community).[2] Crucially, ASAP creates a welcoming, supportive atmosphere that is based on high expectations and deeply engaged staff, including a system of personalized and intensive advising. Each ASAP advisor has a caseload of approximately 150 students that they work with from the point of entry to graduation. Using established criteria, advisors assign students to support level groups (high, medium, or low) each semester; all students in their first semester of ASAP are placed in the high support level group. This model allows all students to be in regular contact with their assigned advisor and allows advisors to determine the frequency and best modes of contact for each student. This is facilitated and managed by an innovative data-tracking system that holds students, faculty, and staff accountable for success.

Over the past ten years, the overall three-year completion rate at CUNY has more than doubled, from less than 11 percent to more than 24.24 percent. ASAP student cohorts, which represent a student population facing greater-than-average challenges, have consistently achieved completion rates above 50 percent. The achievement gap has been reduced for all groups. The program has shown promising applicability to four-year institutions in New York and to community colleges in other regions of the country such as Tennessee, California, West Virginia, and Ohio.

The program's success starts with a culture that permeates all of its activities. Namely, ASAP rejects a deficit model and instead focuses on strengths, holding both participants and staff to very high standards. This fosters a sense of belonging, acceptance, and investment, and produces high levels of satisfaction and self esteem among participants.

The program comprises three core elements:[3] 1) reducing financial barriers; 2) providing high-touch advising and community support; and 3) managing the program and ensuring accountability through a comprehensive data platform. These components are centered on three core beliefs: 1) the importance of academic momentum; 2) the essential need for students to feel integrated into college life and culture; and 3) the value of timely and relevant support. This novel combination has yielded cost-effective delivery, with year-to-year reductions in per-student costs and a current annual cost of less than $3,500 per student, for a total program cost of approximately $87 million a year, funded through a baseline allocaton to CUNY from the City of New York. Given the success of the program, this translates to a *lower* cost per graduate for ASAP students than non-ASAP students.

As stated by MDRC—a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization—in its third-party evaluation of the program, "ASAP's effects are the largest MDRC has found in any of its evaluations of community college reforms. The model offers a highly promising strategy to markedly accelerate credit accumulation and increase graduation rates among educationally and economically disadvantaged populations."[4] ASAP's proven model is ripe for widespread replication across the United States.

Introduction

This paper explores the impact of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY). ASAP was conceived, designed, and implemented to address the low graduation rates of community college students by administering supports that can reduce the time to degree completion.[5] Based on the program's success to date, the leadership of CUNY and ASAP applied for, and won, the 2020 Innovations in American Government Award conferred by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University›s John F. Kennedy School of Government. This paper briefly describes the genesis and history of ASAP and includes a concise literature review highlighting the obstacles to attainment of community college degrees that are endemic across the US, as well as an evaluation of the outcomes of ASAP. Data sources include peer-reviewed studies, written testimony, and in-person interviews and observations of the program conducted in March 2020.

The Challenge

Community colleges are critically important in providing access to higher education for many Americans. Community colleges serve 42 percent of all—and 25 percent of full-time—undergraduate students, and typically serve a higher proportion of low-income students and ethnic and racial minorities than other institutions of higher education.[6] Enrollment is up significantly since 2000, but degree attainment has lagged considerably. This is especially pernicious for low-income and first-generation students, as recent research demonstrates a strong correlation between completion rate and parental educational attainment.[7]

Attending but not completing college is clearly insufficient to improve economic mobility. In contrast, CUNY associate's degrees are proven to have a significant positive impact on mobility rates, particularly for those coming from the bottom quartile of earnings.[8] In fact, CUNY ranks sixth out of the top 10 US colleges in terms of graduates' economic mobility gains.[9]

Nationally, community college graduation rates are very low.[10] Some analyses show that only about 26 percent of enrolled community college students will receive an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years (fewer than 14 percent will receive a bachelor's degree).[11] At CUNY, prior to ASAP, the three-year associate's degree completion rate was only 11 percent.[12]

Completion rates are even worse for the most vulnerable communities. Low-income students and ethnic and racial minorities have considerably lower completion rates.[13] Three-year completion rates by race and ethnicity illustrate deep achievement gaps. While 23 percent of white students graduate within three years, Black students and Hispanic or Latino students graduate at much lower rates (11 percent and 16 percent, respectively).[14]

This is an especially important consideration for schools in the CUNY system, where, for instance, it was reported that 75 percent of students at Bronx Community College (at which over 90 percent of students are Black and Hispanic or Latino)[15] earn less than $15,000 a year.[16]

The Solution

CUNY launched ASAP in 2007 with an initial cohort of 1,132 students, and with a goal of removing the barriers to timely graduation by providing enhanced academic, social, and financial support to students. ASAP has a demonstrated track record of success that has been validated by third-party review and was also recognized by Harvard Kennedy School as the winner of its 2020 Innovations in American Government Award.[17]

The ASAP program addresses significant and pervasive barriers to completion. It operates from an abundance, rather than a deficit, mindset, which means that it highlights and supports the strengths of its students rather than focusing on shortcomings. Thanks to generous support from the City of New York, ASAP expanded from 4,300 students in 2014-15 to over 25,000 in 2018-19. Part of the ASAP expansion across all nine CUNY ASAP partner colleges includes serving more Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors and a campus-wide expansion at Bronx Community College to serve most incoming first-time, full-time freshmen.

There are several prerequisites for the program. Students must be enrolled full-time and must be skills proficient in English (reading/writing) and math, or require no more than two semesters of developmental support. For those students who do need additional development work, there is a pre-matriculation program called CUNY Start that both eliminates remedial needs and provides a direct pathway into ASAP.

Financial Supports

The first structural barrier that ASAP addresses is financial. Participating students who are eligible for financial aid receive tuition and fee gap scholarships to make attending college cost-free.

In addition to meeting the tuition gap, ASAP also covers two other financial obstacles to completion—books and transportation. All participants of ASAP receive free textbooks and an unlimited MetroCard for free public transportation. ASAP also leverages other school and community resources to aid students.

The financial supports were reported by participants to be critical to their successful continuation in school. One student interviewed reflected that when she became pregnant during her second year at LaGuardia Community College, she thought that the cost of raising a child meant that she would not be able to continue her studies. ASAP funding provided her with the financial resources to stay at CUNY and her ASAP advisor identified additional childcare resources available at the college. At the time of interview, the student was preparing to graduate from LaGuardia and had been accepted to begin studies for a bachelor's degree at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the fall of 2020.[18]

Academic Supports

The primary academic support cited by ASAP is its in-depth advising program. Unlike most advising programs at college campuses across the US, where advisors and students meet only once or twice per semester, the program requires regular meetings with advisors based on individual student needs. This helps to build relationships and establish personal accountability.

Academic progress is monitored and measured in real time using a rigorous data platform. The model includes specific benchmarks and minimum requirements for students, including meeting with advisors and career development contacts, feedback from faculty, use of academic support services such as tutoring, and key academic outcomes such as retention, credit accumulation, movement through developmental supports, and graduation.

ASAP participants noted that they had to be accountable and that expectations placed on them are high—and that failure to meet them triggers a fast response from advisors. At the same time, advisors also have benchmarks and reporting requirements to ensure that accountability is reciprocal.

Social Supports

Perhaps the most innovative element of the program is ASAP's strong social support structure. The alumni, current participants, and staff consistently mention that the program "has our back." As one alumna put it, "This [ASAP] very quickly moved from program to family. . . . I still have people reaching out who have already made it, showing me that path more clearly. It feels like a family and is a part of who I am."[19]

Another participant, nearing the end of his time at LaGuardia Community College, noted that his advisor played a critical role in building his self-esteem. As a trans man, this participant was concerned about appropriate pronoun use. "My advisor always used my preferred pronouns, but he also pushed me to set up 'Trans Talk' [a student-led podcast] for the ASAP program to educate the community about trans issues. It helped me to really become not just a better student but a leader."[20]

Supports include individual and group advising sessions, a strong peer support network, and synergistic activities across departments such as career services, assessment, and advising. To foster a sense of community, ASAP incorporates a number of events; for example, one college held a decoration contest for advisor cubicles to encourage participant flow and relationship-building.

Ultimately, it is the combination of the supports that seems to create the synergies and drive success. The primary elements across the supports are establishing creative engagement, including volunteerism; accountability driven by data; fostering a culture of belonging and investment; recognizing staff and faculty for contributions; enabling mission-driven faculty who embrace the persistence principles and serve as important resources to their students;[21] and leveraging resources.

Outcomes

Across 10 cohorts, ASAP student graduation rates have grown to more than double that of non-participants. According to ASAP's internal data and external evaluations:

> ASAP had an average graduation rate of 53.4% vs. 24.6% for the historical matched comparison group. The most recent average graduation rate across ten ASAP cohorts is 52.9%. Students who started ASAP with developmental needs graduated at high rates just like students who entered fully skills proficient: After three years, 47.8% of ASAP students with developmental needs and 60.6% of fully skills proficient ASAP students graduated vs. 20.9% of non-ASAP students with developmental needs and 29.9% of fully skills proficient non-ASAP students. There are significant differences between ASAP and comparison group students in terms of retention rates, movement through developmental coursework, credit accumulation, and graduation rates. These differences are seen as early as the first semester and continue to occur at all junctures over three years. Students from underrepresented groups appear to benefit more from ASAP than other students. When considering longer-term outcomes across CUNY, ASAP students are more likely to earn a degree. Six years after beginning, 63.6% of ASAP first-time freshmen had earned either an associate or baccalaureate degree (or both) vs. 43.3% of comparison group students.[22]

Further, ASAP's three-year graduation rate is more than two and a half times greater than the national average of 19.8 percent.[23] According to their internal analysis, ASAP's expansion is projected to help increase the CUNY three-year associate system graduation rate to 36 percent by 2022.[24] In total, ASAP has served close to 70,000 students since inception across 14 cohorts.

The program has also made significant steps in reducing the achievement gap among nearly all subgroups across race/ethnicity and gender.[25] Similar progress on achievement gaps for low-income students has also been made. This is critical given that a majority of ASAP students come from low-income households and 80 percent receive Pell Grants.

Scale and Replication

The program has effectively scaled, both internally and externally.[26, 27] The initial ASAP pilot included over 1,100 students and was funded by NYC Opportunity[28] Support from the NYC Mayor's office and philanthropic organizations such as the Robin Hood Foundation allowed ASAP to expand to 4,300

students in the 2014–2015 academic year. Based on the results of the program, the City of New York expanded its funding to include more than 25,000 students a year as of the 2018–2019 school year.[29] During that period, success rates *increased* for overall three-year graduation rates and the achievement gap was *reduced* for at-risk student populations.[30]

ASAP students comprise roughly 32 percent of the total associate student full-time enrollment and 24 percent of the total associate student enrollment overall, including part-time students. ASAP has been adapted to the senior college context to support four year baccalaureate degree completion. Lauched with the support of Robin Hood in 2015 at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Accelerate, Complete, and Engage (ACE) has a goal of reaching a 50-percent graduation rate within four years.[31]

Early results for ACE suggest that the ASAP model is proving successful for bachelor's degree students, as well. Students in the fall 2015 ACE cohort had a 58.4 percent four-year graduation rate compared to the completion rate baseline of 24 percent and a national average of less than 20 percent.[32] Based on promising results from the first cohort, the program appears to benefit all subgroups of students, narrowing race and ethnicity achievement gaps.[33]

ASAP has also successfully expanded outside of New York. The first of these out-of-state pilots was launched in Ohio. According to an independent evaluation of the program conducted by MDRC, the Ohio ASAP program nearly doubled degree attainment and had positive effects on enrollment, full-time enrollment, and credits earned. The evaluation further found that, like the program at CUNY, the cost per enrolled student increased but the cost per graduate decreased.[34]

Since this first replication project in Ohio, the ASAP has partnered with colleges in four additional states, forming a growing network of replication partners organized as the CUNY ASAP National Replication Collaborative. Through support of Arnold Ventures "Move the Needle" initiative, Westchester Community College (NY) and Skyline College (CA) launched their replication programs in fall 2018, with Blue Ridge Community and Technical College and West Virginia University at Parkersburg following in fall 2020. The San Mateo County Community College District (SMCCCD), which includes Skyline College, Cañada College, and the College of San Mateo (CA), have scaled the program across the district with the support from the Chancellor's Innovation Awards in Higher Education awarded by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors. Additionally, Nashville State Community College (TN) launched their pilot program in fall 2019 with the support of former Nashville Mayor Briley's Getting Results by Advancing Degrees initiative.

Conclusion

Community colleges have played an important role in America's higher education system since their inception in the early 20th century, providing millions of students with access to vocational pathways and avenues to more advanced degrees. Completion rates, or the number of students graduating with an associate's degree within three years of commencing study, are below 20 percent. Rates are even more dismal for low-income ethnic and racial minorities.

The City University of New York launched the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative to address the low completion rates at its community colleges. ASAP requires full-time enrollment, regular engagement with both program advisors other group advisement/workshop offerings. In return, the program provides tuition gap assistance, an unlimited MetroCard, money for books, and a network of staff and peers to support the learning process. ASAP's success stems from its focus on students' strengths rather than deficits, its attractive incentives for participation, a high-quality and effective data management platform, and very dedicated and passionate staff.

Eliminating barriers to degree attainment is not easy, and many community college programs attempt to mitigate these obstacles. Few, however, have demonstrated verifiable success, and none more so than the ASAP program at CUNY.

Over the past ten years, the overall three-year completion rate at CUNY has more than doubled, from less than 11 percent to more than 22 percent. ASAP student cohorts have consistently achieved completion rates above 50 percent. The achievement gap has been narrowed for all groups. The program has shown to be scalable to four-year institutions and other regions of the country such as Tennessee, California, and Ohio.

ASAP costs approximately $87 million per year. While the total appears high, this translates to approximately $3,440 per enrolled student. The cost of delivery, which includes financial supports, data management and data management platform costs, and high-touch advisory and support services, has continued to decline. Further, the costs are included as non-discretionary formula funding in the city budget, protecting the program from reauthorization and ensuring its continuation. Given the success of the program in increasing the graduation rate, this translates to a *lower* cost per graduate for ASAP than non-ASAP students.

ASAP recognizes the potential of its students to succeed and expects them to do just that.

Notes

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17. Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, "City University of New York Wins Harvard's Innovations in American Government Award," press release, April 21, 2020, https://ash.harvard.edu/news/city-university-new-york-wins-harvard%E2%80%99s-innovations-american-government-award.

18. Interview of current LaGuardia Community College student, conducted by Philip Jordan, on March 3, 2020, at LaGuardia Community College.

19. Interview of ASAP alumna following student voice panel, conducted by Philip Jordan, March 3, 2020 at LaGuardia Community College.

20. Interview of ASAP alumnus following student voice panel, conducted by Philip Jordan, March 3, 2020 at LaGuardia Community College.

21. Interview of Dr. James Wilson, Professor of English, by Philip Jordan on March 3, 2020, at LaGuardia Community College.

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