CUNY ASAP: Scaling Intensive Student Support Services to Raise Graduation Rates at Bronx Community College

OVERVIEW

Program Basics
- The City University of New York Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP) provides extensive services to full-time community college students to help them graduate with an associate’s degree within three years.
- CUNY ASAP’s student supports include financial resources, like tuition and fee gap scholarships, assistance in paying for textbooks, and free public transit passes.
- Students are provided with structured pathways to support academic momentum. They are required to enroll full-time, address developmental education needs immediately and continuously, attend block-scheduled classes, and take courses in winter and summer sessions.
- CUNY ASAP also offers direct personal support services, providing each student with a dedicated advisor, tutoring opportunities, career development programming, and activities to connect to the broader ASAP and campus community.

How Does CUNY Improve Economic Mobility?
- CUNY ASAP increases the likelihood that first-year associate degree students graduate within three years. Obtaining a postsecondary degree positions individuals for high-quality employment and higher lifetime earnings.
- CUNY ASAP serves community college students who are predominantly from low-income families. Postsecondary degree attainment is particularly low across the country for such students, perpetuating a cycle of socioeconomic stagnation.
- Individuals with a post-secondary degree experience better health outcomes, are less likely to be incarcerated, and are able to spend more time with their children.

EVIDENCE LEVEL: PROVEN (HIGHEST TIER)

Ranked as having the highest level of evidence by the U.S. Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse, Social Program That Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target population</th>
<th>Program cost</th>
<th>Implementation locations</th>
<th>Dates active</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students enrolled in post-secondary education</td>
<td>$3,440 per student per year</td>
<td>New York City, with replications in Ohio, California, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Westchester County (NY)</td>
<td>2007–present</td>
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Low community college completion rates: In 2007, just 13% of City University of New York (CUNY) community college students graduated within three years. This problem was especially acute at Bronx Community College (BCC), where the three-year graduation rate was under 8%.1

Emerging opportunities for skilled workers: A report by the Center for an Urban Future projected that by 2014, 41% of all jobs in New York City would be “middle-skill” positions that did not require a four-year degree but did demand an associate degree or other post-secondary credential.

Racial disparities in earnings and credentials: At the time, New York City residents of color had limited access to middle-skill jobs, with more than 54% of Hispanic residents and 48% of Black residents working in low-wage roles in 2008.5

The need to scale a successful pilot: CUNY ASAP launched as a pilot program in 2007 and by 2012 had demonstrated strong results. To dramatically improve community college completion outcomes at scale, the program needed to be dramatically expanded (4,400 students in 2015, and 25,000 by 2019). At BCC, the program sought to expand from 750 to 4,400 students enrolled annually.6 7 8

The Solution

Civic: A comprehensive approach to help CUNY students overcome barriers: CUNY ASAP adopted a comprehensive synthesis of evidence-based practices to remove barriers to full-time enrollment and timely graduation. To be eligible for ASAP, students must enroll full-time in an approved major, be proficient in math and English or require no more than two semesters of developmental education, meet New York City/State residency requirements, and file for both federal and state financial aid. Those enrolling as continuing students must have no more than 15 college credits and a minimum GPA of 2.0.
The Solution, continued

- Personal, academic, and financial supports: Program components include integrated direct student services (like personalized advisement, tutoring, and career development services), pathways supporting academic momentum (such as flexible class scheduling and full-time enrollment), and financial supports (such as tuition and fee gap scholarships, textbook assistance, and free public transit passes).
- An unprecedented system-wide scaling effort: Following ASAP’s success starting in the Bloomberg administration, the de Blasio administration decided to dramatically expand it, providing $77 million in new funding to allow CUNY to scale ASAP from nearly 4,400 students in 2015 to 25,000 students in 2019. ASAP’s expansion included a focus on serving more STEM students across all partner colleges and a broader college-wide expansion at BCC aiming to enroll all eligible incoming full-time students.

Keys to Success

- A comprehensive approach to student success model anchored by trusting relationships with advisors: The ASAP model combines a series of evidence-based practices to help students confront financial, logistical, and academic obstacles to graduation. All supports are anchored by its 150:1 advisor–student ratio, which is less than half of the average ratio at community colleges nationwide.6
- A bold initial public investment: The Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), created by Mayor Bloomberg’s administration, was established to invest in promising but not–yet–proven strategies to improve rates of upward economic mobility. CUNY ASAP’s initial three–year pilot was launched with an investment of $19.5 million from CEO.14
- An unwavering commitment to data collection and independent evaluation: From its launch, ASAP has committed to rigorous data collection and independent evaluation. In doing so, the program was consistently able to demonstrate its clear success to internal stakeholders and local government leaders.15
- Two major public investments to enable scale: After ASAP demonstrated strong results in its pilot phase, the de Blasio administration funded two different expansions. In 2012, the Center for Economic Opportunity provided $6.5 million annually through 2015, allowing ASAP to more than triple in size from 1,286 students to almost 4,400. In 2015, Mayor de Blasio invested an additional $77 million in ASAP, allowing ASAP to serve over 25,000 students per year by 2019.16
- College–level implementation support provided by CUNY Central: During the most rapid period of the expansion phase, two CUNY Central staff were deployed to BCC to provide full integration of ASAP into all campus operations, including admissions, financial aid, course registration, bursar operations, and more. CUNY Central also facilitates regular convenings of ASAP directors and other professional college program staff to share best practices, compare outcomes from each site, and collectively troubleshoot.
- Full buy-in from campus leadership: Leaders at BCC integrated ASAP’s proven success practices across all staff divisions and operations, facilitating broad campus buy-in as each department revamped its processes and practices.

Major Obstacles

- Overcoming initial skepticism from campus staff: Many administrative department leaders at BCC were not initially receptive to overhauling campus operations and processes to accommodate ASAP’s growth, thus necessitating interventions from school and program leadership.
- A shortage of student advisors: Given the rapid pace of scaling, ASAP experienced significant challenges in hiring and onboarding new advisors. The program also struggled to fully train advisors on a truncated timeline. At BCC, ASAP hired 20 new advisors between 2016 and 2017, but had challenges maintaining the 1:150 advisor–student caseload ratio.
Effective communication with prospective students: Successfully communicating that most new and recently admitted full-time students were eligible for participation in the ASAP program was a marketing challenge. The program in its smaller pre-expansion state was perceived by some students as being selective, and messaging around the BCC expansion confronted this misperception.

COVID threatens funding, services: With the City of New York facing difficult FY20 budgetary decisions in the wake of the pandemic, Mayor de Blasio proposed a $20 million cut (23%) to CUNY ASAP's city funding, despite the program's long track record of success and strong network of advocates. CUNY was able to absorb some of the ASAP reduction, though the program operated at a 15% budget deficit in FY20, leading to 2,000 fewer new students and some changes to the level of ASAP student resources. Despite these adjustments, ASAP was fully operational in academic year 2020–21, converting all program supports and services to virtual delivery with high rates of student engagement.

**TIMELINE**

**CITY OF NEW YORK INVESTS $19.5 MILLION IN CUNY ASAP PILOT**
2006

Mayor Bloomberg launches a new division of his office, the Center for Economic Opportunity (now NYC Opportunity), to fund promising programs addressing economic mobility. Then-CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein pitches a comprehensive synthesis of evidence-based best practices to address stubbornly low CUNY community college graduation rates. Mayor Bloomberg regularly cites ASAP as an important component of his economic development agenda.²

**CUNY ASAP LAUNCHES AT SIX SITES**
Fall 2007

With a cohort of 1,132 students at six CUNY campuses, ASAP begins delivering services to a select group of students, all of whom were deemed fully proficient in reading, writing, and math. Of that group, 621 students (55%), would go on to graduate within three years – a rate 30 percentage points higher than their comparison group. At BCC, 49% of the cohort graduates within three years, compared to 16% of the comparison group.³

**RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL BEGINS**
Fall 2010

An independent evaluation conducted by MDRC and funded by the Robin Hood Foundation and the Helmsley Charitable Trust begins in Fall 2010 at three program sites. The study focuses on students with developmental education needs, whom the program began serving in 2009.⁴

**FIRST WAVE OF EXPANSION BEGINS**
Fall 2012

Based on strong results from ASAP's first two cohorts, NYC Opportunity designates $6.5M per year as a permanent allocation to CUNY to support ASAP. This funding bolstered a first-phase expansion of ASAP's system-wide expansion from 1,286 in 2011 to 4,352 in 2015. At BCC, the program raises its recruitment target from 80 to 500 new students per year.⁵

**ASAP REPLICATES MODEL IN OHIO**
2014

In partnership with MDRC and the Ohio Department of Higher Education, and with funding from Ascendium Education Group, CUNY Central helps three Ohio community colleges implement the ASAP model. MDRC’s evaluation published three years later shows similar results to New York: a doubling of graduation rates.⁶
TIMELINE, CONTINUED

**PRESIDENT OBAMA CITES ASAP AS MODEL**
January 2015
While rolling out his plan for tuition-free community college, President Obama points to CUNY ASAP as a model for “promising and evidence-based institutional reforms.” He highlights the program’s financial supports, such as subsidizing textbooks and transit costs, as particularly impactful practices.15

**MDRC PUBLISHES FINDINGS**
February 2015
The study shows that, over the course of three years, CUNY ASAP nearly doubles graduation rates for students with developmental education needs, describing the effects as “the largest MDRC has found in any of its evaluations of community college reforms.” The report points to several elements of the ASAP model, especially the small caseloads for advisors, a suite of financial supports, and strong encouragement to graduate within three years, as keys to success.6

**CITY OF NEW YORK INVESTS $77.4 MILLION IN FURTHER ASAP EXPANSION**
October 2015
Citing evidence from the recently-released MDRC evaluation, Mayor de Blasio and the City Council’s Finance and Higher Education Committees lend strong support to expanding CUNY ASAP’s expansion, allocating $42 million per year; the expansion is anchored by the campus-wide transformation at BCC. The City Council allocates an additional $35.4 million for the program to expand its supports to STEM students.18

**SECOND WAVE OF EXPANSION BEGINS**
2015
With a mandate from the city, ASAP sets ambitious growth targets: expanding from 4,352 students to 25,000 by 2019 while maintaining strong student outcomes. At BCC, the program seeks to recruit as many as 1,700 new students per year and to serve all eligible freshmen.39

**ASAP MODEL REPLICA TED IN CALIFORNIA, NEW YORK**
2017
After the successful replication in Ohio, CUNY Central, with funding from Arnold Ventures, provides technical assistance to implement ASAP at Skyline College in California and Westchester Community College in New York.19 20

**BCC HITS EXPANSION GOALS**
2018
In three years, ASAP grows from serving 750 students to 4,352 – half of all BCC students. The school’s fall 2018 ASAP cohort would be its largest yet, serving nearly 60% of first-time students.39

**ASAP MODEL REPLICA TED ACROSS COUNTRY**
2020
With funding from Arnold Ventures, institutions in New York, California, and West Virginia partner with CUNY Central to replicate the model. Funds from local city and district agencies have supported the launch and expansion of ASAP replications in Nashville and across the San Mateo County Community College District. Within the CUNY system, ASAP enrolls more than 25,000 associate degree-seeking students per year. By 2022, ASAP is projected to help increase the CUNY system-wide, three-year associate graduation rate to 35%.21
THE PROCESS

Confronting the Problem

- A new approach to public investments in economic mobility: Seeking to address the longstanding problem of intergenerational poverty in New York, Mayor Bloomberg launches the Center for Economic Opportunity. He tasks the Center with investing in promising, evidence-based programs, especially ones that engage working and low-income young adults.
- The Chancellor’s pitch: CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein proposes a pilot program that combines empirically-backed academic, financial, and personal support strategies for students.
- Pilot funding secured: With strong backing from the Mayor and other local government leaders, the Center for Economic Opportunity provides enough funding -- $19.5 million -- to pilot CUNY ASAP for three years, serving over 1,100 students.
- System-wide overhaul: After ASAP demonstrates strong results in independent evaluations, the de Blasio administration decides to fund an ambitious expansion that seeks to fundamentally transform the CUNY system.
- BCC’s campus transformation: BCC, which served 90% students of color and 80% Pell grant recipients, is selected for the most significant integration of ASAP into the broader campus community.

Designing the Strategy

- Evidence-based practices: For decades, academic literature has provided strong support for isolated interventions that would boost college graduation rates, including financial, academic, and personal supports.
- Comprehensive approaches to student success: CUNY leaders structure a comprehensive approach to student success program. These include intensive advising, tutoring, mandating full-time course loads, priority class scheduling, and subsidies for tuition, textbooks, and transit cards.
- Small caseloads: Advisors develop close relationships with their students and meet multiple times per semester to track progress against goals and discuss student performance data. Caseloads are typically around 150:1, less than half of an average community college advisor caseload.
- Integrating campus services: To integrate the ASAP model into BCC, campus leadership must transform a number of school-wide operations.
THE PROCESS, CONTINUED

Allocating the Funding

- Annual city and state funding: In 2006, the City of New York’s Center for Economic Opportunity initially allocates $19.5 million to CUNY for the ASAP pilot to run for three years. After the program’s first two cohorts outperform targets, CEO recommends that ASAP’s pilot annual funding of $6.5M be provided to CUNY as a permanent annual allocation from the City. The State of New York also allocates $2.5 million annually to the ASAP program.
- Grants fund evaluation and first-phase expansion: Between 2009 and 2014, CUNY ASAP also raised $7.6 million from private foundations, including the Robin Hood Foundation, the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, and the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. This funding helps to support the program’s first phase expansion from 1,132 to 4,352 students between 2012 and 2015, along with external evaluation activities.
- Evidence-based public investment: Encouraged by positive findings from a random assignment study by MDRC, a comprehensive cost study by Teachers College, and ASAP’s continued success, the City of New York approves $77 million in new funding to rapidly expand ASAP from nearly 4,400 students to 25,000 students by 2019. ASAP expansion includes an increased focus on serving more STEM students across all partner colleges and a college-wide expansion at BCC.
- Funding for advisors, textbooks, and transit: The program, with an estimated cost per student of $3,440 per year, dedicates significant resources to subsidizing transit and textbooks and hiring well-qualified advisors to keep caseloads relatively small. On average, 95% of the ASAP budget is distributed to colleges and/or supports direct student resource needs such as textbooks, public transit passes, and tuition and fee gap scholarships.

Implementing the Plan

- Recruiting advisors: Once expansion funding is allocated by the de Blasio administration and enrollment targets are set, ASAP immediately begins the search for seasoned advisors with at least four years of previous advising experience. BCC must quickly hire and train 20 new advisors.
- Finding students: To expand ASAP’s applicant pool, ASAP hires dedicated recruiters to conduct citywide outreach, build relationships with high schools and community-based organizations, and develop an algorithm to identify potentially eligible students at the point of admission, which ensures they receive targeted communications about steps to join ASAP.
- On-campus support: Every CUNY school with an ASAP program manages recruitment, provides direct services to students, tracks student data to monitor progress and engagement, and ensures effective collaboration and communication with other college units.
- College-level implementation: Every CUNY college implementing ASAP has a dedicated staff that provides day to day operational oversight, manages student recruitment post-admissions, and provides direct services to students.
- Centralized administration: CUNY Central provides overall program administration and fiscal oversight, program-wide evaluation and data management, cultivation of external partnerships, management of program-wide resource needs (such as public transit passes, textbooks, and promotional materials), citywide outreach, coordination of program-wide needs including staff training, communications, and marketing, and direct technical assistance to national replication partners.
- Frequent evaluations and reporting: ASAP conducts regular internal evaluations and shares monthly reports with key stakeholders, including the Mayor’s office and city councilors, to show program progress and returns on public investment.
Measuring & Refining the Approach

- Data collection and independent evaluations: From its launch, ASAP commits to data collection and evaluation; MDRC begins a randomized control trial at three CUNY ASAP sites in 2010, and starting in 2014, an evaluation of the ASAP replication in Ohio.
- Cost-benefit analysis: ASAP is also the subject of a two-part cost-benefit analysis from Teachers College at Columbia University in 2012 and 2013; the study shows a return of $3–$4 for every taxpayer dollar invested in the program.
- Tracking student outcomes: On the ground, advisors collect myriad student data, including academic outcomes (like grades and credit accumulation), program engagement contacts such as meetings with advisors, as well as participation in career development and other group advisement/program workshop offerings.
- Data-informed advising: On an ongoing basis, ASAP advisors share student outcome data with one another and identify successful practices and intervention tactics for students with similar profiles; in some cases, advisor data sharing has been used as the basis for increasing the cadence of visits, or for facilitating group advising sessions.
ENDNOTES

8. Internal data provided by CUNY
15. List of evaluations of CUNY ASAP model: http://www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap/evaluation/external-reports/#1485901401932-25fd34e8-d30e
RESOURCES

- ASAP program website
- MDRC three-year evaluation of ASAP program
- MDRC evaluation of ASAP Ohio expansion
- MDRC FAQ on ASAP program

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THE ECONOMIC MOBILITY CATALOG

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