**Expanding a Successful Reform for Increasing Graduation Rates: The Continuing Story of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)**

**A Forum Hosted by American Youth Policy Forum and MDRC**

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Founded in 2007 with support from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, CUNY ASAP is a structured degree pathway program for associate degree-seeking students currently offered at six community colleges and one comprehensive college that offers associate and bachelor’s degrees[[1]](#footnote-1). Key program components include full-time enrollment in target majors (most majors other than nursing and some allied health), block scheduled first-year courses, consolidated-schedule cohort course-taking by major, financial resources, intrusive and mandatory advisement, winter and summer course taking, a student-success seminar, career services, and tutoring. ASAP both provides a lot to students and asks a lot of them: In addition to requiring full-time enrollment, ASAP requires students to see their advisor frequently and take any developmental education courses early, and requires some students to attend tutoring. ASAP targets low-income students with some developmental needs (i.e: one to two course needs based on assessment test placements) or those who are fully skills proficient and consistently realizes two and three-year graduation rates that are more than double those of similar comparison group students. ASAP has garnered national attention as a result of rigorous evaluation by CUNY and MDRC. Since its founding, ASAP has served more than 6,400 students. The program has just completed a multi-year expansion that has brought total enrollment to 4,400 students at seven CUNY colleges in fall 2014. CUNY recently received new funding from the City of New York ($35 million over the next three years) that will further expand ASAP to 13,000 students by fall 2016. In addition, CUNY has entered into a partnership with MDRC, the Ohio Board of Regents, and the Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation to support an ASAP replication demonstration project at three community colleges in Ohio.

To discuss and explore the impact of CUNY ASAP and the evaluation findings on efforts to improve postsecondary graduation rates, this forum included two panels. The first described the ASAP model, including comments from an ASAP graduate, and provided a preview of the impressive results of the MDRC evaluation. The second, a responding panel, discussed the role of policy in implementation and challenges of scaling and replicating this successful model.

**Panel I: CUNY ASAP and a Preview of the MDRC Evaluation**

**Donna Linderman, University Associate Dean for Student Success Initiatives, CUNY**, introduced CUNY ASAP and provided information on the program’s design and the University's ongoing internal evaluation of ASAP (quasi-experimental constructed comparison group design) using student-level data for previous and currently enrolled ASAP participants. Designed to address the fact that many community college students are poorly prepared for college, education is often competing for students' time, and college campuses and procedures can be difficult to navigate, ASAP was created to alleviate these challenges. Most CUNY community college students enter college poorly prepared (79% with developmental education needs), and many drop out (only 66% re-enroll after a year and 14% graduate in three years). CUNY ASAP is changing this trajectory by removing financial barriers to full-time study, providing structured degree pathways and comprehensive supports, establishing clear expectations for students, building community among cohorts of students, and creating more engaged students who graduate in a timely manner.

CUNY ASAP began with a goal of at least 50% of ASAP students completing an associate degree within three years. By the end of the second year, ASAP had a graduation rate of 30% for its first cohort (versus 11% for a constructed comparison group of similar students). After three years, the first cohort had a graduation rate of 55% (versus 24% for the comparison group). By 2012, the three-year graduation rate of the second cohort of ASAP students was 56% (versus 23% for the comparison group), at which point the CUNY Chancellor announced plans to expand ASAP to more than 4,000 students by 2014.

CUNY is constantly reviewing data from its internal evaluation of ASAP and uses data to assess efficacy and to make adjustments to the program to improve student outcomes. A review of student movement through developmental education shows that at the end of one year, about 16% of ASAP students still have some developmental education needs (versus 41% for a group of non-ASAP comparison group students). Differences in graduation rates for ASAP students versus comparison groups are equally impressive, with ASAP rates between two and three times the rates of comparison groups across student groups, including students with and without developmental education needs. Results are consistent across the six campuses. Recent cost effectiveness and benefit studies by the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (CBCSE) at Teachers College found that while ASAP has a higher up-front cost than the traditional associate degree program at CUNY, the much higher graduation rate means a savings of $6,500 per graduate. Additionally, lifetime earnings, tax revenues, and savings on public programs are estimated (Levin & Garcia, 2012) at $46.5 million higher for 1,000 enrolled ASAP students than the same number of students enrolled in the regular program track (Levin & Garcia, 2013).

As a result of its demonstrated success, ASAP will be significantly expanded within CUNY. Effective fall 2014, the program now serves one-fifth of all the university's first-time full-time community college students (4,300 students), and will expand to 13,000 students by 2016-17. With expansion, ASAP costs are decreasing, dropping from $6,000 per student pre-expansion to $3,900 per student in the 2014-15 academic year.

**Sue Scrivener, Senior Associate, MDRC**, recounted that in 2009 CUNY approached MDRC

requesting a random assignment study of ASAP. MDRC decided to do the evaluation because ASAP is comprehensive and longer lasting than other reforms and showed great promise to substantially help students. Over three years, MDRC studied the implementation and cost of ASAP, as well as its impacts on student academic outcomes. The MDRC study took place at three CUNY community colleges (Borough of Manhattan, Kingsborough, and LaGuardia) and used a random assignment research design (i.e., students invited to take part in the study were randomly assigned to either enroll in ASAP or enroll in usual college services). Students targeted for the evaluation were: 1) those with family income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level or Pell-grant eligible; 2) in need of one or two developmental courses; 3) incoming first-year students, or continuing students with 12 or fewer credits and a 2.0 GPA or greater; and 4) willing to attend school full time. The evaluation, which began in 2010, included a racially diverse group of 900 students, with average age of 21.5, 62% of whom were female, 6% of whom were married, 15% of whom had a child, and 31% of whom were employed.

Scrivener provided a preview of an MDRC report, scheduled to be released in early 2015. Overall, the implementation study found that ASAP was very well implemented and the difference between ASAP and regular college services was very large. For example, ASAP provided much more intensive student supports than did the usual college services. Students assigned to ASAP reported an average of more than six times as many meetings with an advisor during their first year than students assigned to usual college services, four times as many meetings with a career services counselor, and three times as many meetings with a tutor. Over three years, MDRC found that ASAP increased enrollment, increased accumulation of credits, nearly doubled graduation rates, and increased the likelihood of a student eventually enrolling in a four-year school. An MDRC cost effectiveness study had findings similar to the study conducted by CBCSE: the cost per graduate was lower than for usual college services because so many more ASAP students graduated within three years.

Scrivener said ASAP is the most successful higher education program MDRC has studied and strongly recommended further adoption of the model. The MDRC study demonstrated that

a comprehensive, long-term program can substantially boost student success, finding that ASAP's combination of a full-time requirement and array of supports was central to improving and accelerating students' progress and that monitoring students' participation in the program and providing a meaningful benefit to those who participate seemed to increase engagement. Outcomes for developmental education students can be markedly improved without changing what happens in the classroom and ensuring students take developmental education courses early can hasten and increase completion of those required courses.

**Loukman Lamany, Bronx Community College ASAP graduate and Baruch College graduate,** shared information about his background and experiences in the ASAP. Lamany came to the United States from Togo in 2004. He wanted to attend school, but needed income. Lamany worked as a waiter and store clerk, and he sold DVDs on the streets of Harlem, but he was barely meeting his own expenses. In 2009, dissatisfied with his job and searching for a way to make an impact on his family and community, he decided to attend college. When he looked into Bronx Community College he learned about ASAP. ASAP's benefits were the prime reason Lamany decided to enroll in the program, and, indeed, these proved very helpful, allowing him to focus on his schoolwork and get involved in college and neighborhood activities. ASAP advisors and other staff helped him navigate everything from academics to family matters. In his second year, Lamany was invited to partcipate in the CUNY-wide ASAP Leadership Program. As part of this program, Lamany decided to work on environmental issues in the Bronx, an experience that inspired him to get involved in civic issues. Thanks to the ASAP program, after two years Lamany graduated from Bronx Community College with an associate degree in Business Administration. In 2014, Lamany obtained a Bachelor's degree in Management from Baruch College.

**Q&A for Panel I**

***Are there any policies in place in New York that are providing an incentive for having a better graduation rate?***

Linderman explained that New York is not a performance-based state or city, so CUNY does not have any direct policy mandate to improve graduation rates other than a moral obligation to better serve its students. The expansion of ASAP at CUNY is about supporting capacity to do so.

***Was it meaningful to make the financial benefit of ASAP a tuition waiver as opposed to last dollar scholarship?***

Linderman explained that the vast majority of CUNY community college students get full financial aid, so most students do not take out student loans. When students have a gap need, it is generally only a modest amount. Scrivener added that the ASAP program group reported having less debt post-graduation than did the control group.

***How do you fund the books for ASAP students?***

Linderman explained that ASAP budgets $500 for textbooks per student per year (based on analysis of rentals, purchases, and buybacks) and includes this allocation in its cost per student. The program is funded primarily with City and some state tax levy funds, but has also received support from foundations such as the Robin Hood Foundation, the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, and the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust.

***Did you consider those who transferred to a four-year program after three years in the graduation rates for ASAP?***

CUNY ASAP does not count transfers to a four-year college without a degree in its graduation rates, but does track transfers as an additional successful outcome. For example, the first ASAP cohort (fall 2007) had a 55% three-year graduation rate, and an additional 8% of students transferred without earning an associate degree for a total of 63% of students graduating or transferring. Scrivener explained that the MDRC study looked separately at graduating with an Associate’s degree and transferring to four-year school.

***ASAP's full-time enrollment requirement must have an effect on outcomes. Would you consider trying part-time enrollment?***

Linderman explained that CUNY ASAP wants its students to be full-time and the program establishes systems, schedules, and supports to make that possible for most students. Additionally, most CUNY community college students (roughly 85%) begin their studies full time. In dialogue with non-CUNY colleges interested in the ASAP model but concerned about the full-time requirement, she has suggested considering how to spread 30 credits out over 12 months to lighten the load.

***Do you have data on students with disabilities participating in the ASAP program?***

Linderman said that while ASAP gladly serves students with disabilities it has not systematically tracked such students. Disability status is not something CUNY asks students to disclose; it is left to the student to decide if they wish to share information with their advisor, who are then able to connect students to campus disability resources and make any needed referrals.

**Panel II: The Role of Policy in Implementation and Challenges of Scaling and Replication**

**Brett Visger, Associate Vice Chancellor, Institutional Collaboration & Completion, Ohio Board of Regents,** described the Ohio context for replication of the ASAP program. Each institution is autonomously governed, so the Board of Regents tries to encourage innovation and collaboration, but does not have control over institutional decisions. In 2012, the state created a Task Force on Postsecondary Success that said each campus needed 1) an articulation plan with metrics and 2) implementation of a performance funding formula. In Ohio, community colleges and universities have separate pots of funds, thus, Visger is cautious to avoid a "nuclear arms race" for completion because this could have negative effects for some institutions. The Ohio Board of Regents is trying to identify best practices and best levers to improve outcomes for all students. The state is currently planning replication of ASAP at three community colleges, with the hope of eventually scaling up programming.

**Dr. Belinda Miles, Executive Vice President and Provost, Cuyahoga Community College,** explained that Cuyahoga Community College is one of three institutions that have been selected as replication sites. Cuyahoga Community College has been studying their data very closely for years. In the past, they have offered their students many programs and services; now they are looking at what actually works for most. The college is excited for the opportunity to replicate ASAP because of its great success at CUNY. Ohio presents a different context for the replication of the ASAP program as unlike New York, Ohio does not provide a state supplement, thus funding the program is more challenging. Cuyahoga Community College continues to advocate and work closely with their state partners to make changes to key policy issues.

**Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP),** explained that it is very unusual to see such large effects from a comprehensive program. Education policy advocates usually examine small interventions that, when combined, move things only incrementally. If we are going to be ambitious about increasing college graduation, argued Duke-Benfield, we need to significantly invest. Financial supports (the core of the ASAP program) matter and are central to how these students are completing. And we must ask the challenging questions: What are our policy priorities? Do we have policies to back up our supposed support for increased college graduation?

**Ajita Menon, Senior Policy Advisor for Higher Education at the White House Domestic Policy Council,** explained that the President's priorities for higher education include figuring out how best to continue to invest in things like Pell awards and in innovation funding for higher education, with an emphasis on evidence-based practices and seeding their expansion. The best ideas come from college campuses that are testing them. There is great potential to really make the cost case for why ASAP is ripe for scaling. The White House is hosting a second College Opportunity Summit and the focus will be on the connection between K-12 and postsecondary, as well as learning from each other with an eye toward adapting models that are already proving successful.

**Q&A for Panel II**

***Funding makes a program like ASAP successful. How does year-round enrollment fit into this?***

Menon said the challenge is to figure out how you structure Pell grants to ensure credit accumulation and progress. Programs like ASAP certainly help make the case for this type of funding. An increase for Pell was in the President's budget, but did not get funded by Congress. Duke-Benfield said she hopes as Congress pays more attention to successful models like ASAP, they will be open to looking at Pell again. Visger pointed out that credit accumulation matters, but paying for it is a big issue. In Ohio five or six years ago in the midst of recession, there was a policy decision made to keep tuition capped across the public system. This was accomplished by taking funds from the need-based scholarship pot. Funding becomes even more complicated if you start to look at year-round enrollment. Miles posited that framing this as opportunity (Pell incentive), paired with obligation (work expected of students), could be a helpful way of reframing the issue.

***ASAP is multi-faceted and comprehensive. But there are policymakers who often want to make a simple decision about a silver bullet and are less receptive to comprehensive programs. How can we convince policymakers to adopt more comprehensive programming like ASAP?***

Miles agreed that it is hard to explain comprehensive programming. Building an expanded understanding is a very important part of framing the return on investment discussion. She also reiterated that costs will be reduced with expansion of the model and suggested that down the road it might make sense to evaluate whether all the interventions and supports of ASAP are needed for all students. Duke-Benfield asserted that college presidents know who their students are and they will want interventions that actually work. It depends on institutional leadership; a sea change will not happen through policy changes alone.

***ASAP is not just a comprehensive program. It is a program that makes certain demands on students tied to rewards. This reciprocal obligation is a very important message. (from MDRC staff)***

***ASAP has expanded dramatically and quickly. What are your thoughts on how to protect the integrity of the ASAP program and it grows?***

Miles suggested making funds available for the particular model, allowing it to evolve differently in different locations. Implementation cannot be the same in all locations, she contended. Visger said they are implementing ASAP slowly in Ohio with only three sites because fidelity to the model is a challenge given the comprehensive nature of the services.

***What federal or state policy changes would be the greatest help to implementing ASAP?***

Duke-Benfield argued we have to be serious about how we are going to fund support services. We do a little of this; but it is usually seen as an add-on, not a core part of programming, so it is dropped more easily when there are cuts in funding. We cannot keep ignoring the necessity of support services. Visger said we need to change mental images of who college students are so we can think about appropriate supports and structures. Another policy challenge is figuring out how to pay for transition from an input to an output model. Menon argued that we need to take a more outcome-driven approach that avoids disincentives to serving underserved populations. Menon continued by posing the question: “How do we adapt financial aid models in successful ways, getting away from traditional concept of time and offering more flexibility in exchange for higher responsible for outcomes?” The Administration is very interested in community colleges and the opportunity to strengthen the middle class through these institutions.

***Is the Ohio Board of Regents working with school districts to avoid so many students needing developmental education when they enter college?***

Yes, said Visger, Ohio is working to better align K-12 and postsecondary and to encourage dialog between secondary and postsecondary faculty about what students need to know to be successful in a college classroom.

The forum concluded with the second panel reiterating the possibility of continued lessons learned from ASAP’s current scaling efforts and the need to link our policy discussion with the research and practice from the field.

1. As of fall 2014, ASAP is found at Borough of Manhattan, Bronx, Hostos, Kingsborough, LaGuardia, and Queensborough Community Colleges and Medgar Evers College, a CUNY comprehensive college. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)