

*Executive Summary*

# DOUBLING GRADUATION RATES

Three-Year Effects  
of CUNY's Accelerated  
Study in Associate  
Programs (ASAP) for  
Developmental  
Education Students

Susan Scrivener  
Michael J. Weiss  
Alyssa Ratledge  
Timothy Rudd  
Colleen Sommo  
Hannah Fresques

mdrc

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY



February 2015



# **Executive Summary**

## **Doubling Graduation Rates**

### **Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students**

**Susan Scrivener  
Michael J. Weiss  
Alyssa Ratledge  
Timothy Rudd  
Colleen Sommo  
Hannah Fresques**

**February 2015**



The ASAP evaluation is supported by the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust and the Robin Hood Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The Kresge Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).

Copyright © 2015 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

## Overview

Community colleges offer a pathway to the middle class for low-income individuals. Although access to college has expanded, graduation rates at community colleges remain low, especially for students who need developmental (remedial) courses to build their math, reading, or writing skills. Many reforms have been found to help students in the short term, but few have substantially boosted college completion. The City University of New York's (CUNY's) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), launched in 2007 with funding from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, is an uncommonly comprehensive and long-term program designed to help more students graduate and help them graduate more quickly.

ASAP represents both an opportunity and an obligation for students. It was designed to address multiple potential barriers to student success and to address them for up to three years. ASAP requires students to attend college full time and encourages them to take developmental courses early and to graduate within three years. The program provides comprehensive advisement from an adviser with a small caseload and enhanced career services and tutoring. ASAP offers blocked or linked courses for the first year and offers a seminar for the first few semesters, covering topics such as goal-setting and study skills. The program provides a tuition waiver that fills any gap between financial aid and college tuition and fees. It also provides free MetroCards for use on public transportation, contingent on participation in key program services, and free use of textbooks.

This report presents results from a random assignment study of ASAP at three CUNY community colleges: Borough of Manhattan, Kingsborough, and LaGuardia. Low-income students who needed one or two developmental courses were randomly assigned either to a program group, who could participate in ASAP, or to a control group, who could receive the usual college services. Comparing the two groups' outcomes provides an estimate of ASAP's effects. Key findings from the report include the following:

- **ASAP was well implemented.** The program provided students with a wide array of services over a three-year period, and effectively communicated requirements and other messages.
- **ASAP substantially improved students' academic outcomes over three years, almost doubling graduation rates.** ASAP increased enrollment in college and had especially large effects during the winter and summer intersessions. On average, program group students earned 48 credits in three years, 9 credits more than did control group students. By the end of the study period, 40 percent of the program group had received a degree, compared with 22 percent of the control group. At that point, 25 percent of the program group was enrolled in a four-year school, compared with 17 percent of the control group.
- **At the three-year point, the cost per degree was lower in ASAP than in the control condition.** Because the program generated so many more graduates than the usual college services, the cost per degree was lower despite the substantial investment required to operate 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.



## Preface

Community colleges provide relatively affordable postsecondary instruction to millions of students across the country, and their critical role in helping build the nation's workforce has gained increasing recognition. Unfortunately, many community college students never earn a degree. Completion rates are especially low for students who enter college without all the math, reading, or writing skills they need to do college-level work. Numerous reforms have been tried to help students with developmental education needs succeed, but few have substantially boosted college completion.

In 2007, the City University of New York (CUNY), with the support of the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, launched Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to encourage and support community college students to attend school full time and graduate. The exceptionally ambitious program provides a rich array of financial assistance, special courses, enhanced advising, and other support services for three full years.

This report presents important findings from MDRC's random assignment evaluation of ASAP at three CUNY community colleges. The evaluation targeted low-income students who needed one or two developmental courses to build their math, reading, or writing skills. ASAP's effects are the largest MDRC has found in any of its evaluations of community college reforms. After three years, the program substantially increased full-time enrollment, accelerated credit accumulation, and almost doubled the rate of graduating with an associate's degree. It also increased the likelihood that students would transfer to a four-year school. Positive effects were found for all of the subgroups of students examined in the evaluation. The evaluation also found that, even though ASAP required a substantial investment, the cost per degree was lower among students in the program than it was for those receiving the usual college services.

ASAP's effects after three years signal the great promise of comprehensive, extended interventions to substantially improve outcomes for community college students. ASAP's effects are especially notable given that they were for a group of students who entered college with developmental education needs. ASAP shows that such students can succeed with the right combination of services and supports, and without changing what happens inside the classroom.

In light of ASAP's success, CUNY is continuing to expand the program, with a goal of serving over 13,000 students by fall 2016. CUNY and MDRC are working together to develop evaluations of ASAP replications at interested community colleges. ASAP is receiving attention across the nation, and rightly so: It is a model program all colleges should consider.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President, MDRC





## Acknowledgments

The City University of New York (CUNY) launched Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) in 2007 with funding from New York City’s Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), and CEO has continued to support the program. In 2009, senior university leadership from the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs — Alexandra Logue, former Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and University Provost; John Mogulescu, Senior University Dean for Academic Affairs and Dean of the School of Professional Studies; and David Crook, University Dean for Institutional Research and Assessment — approached MDRC about the possibility of evaluating ASAP, and we enthusiastically accepted the opportunity. CUNY secured the initial investment for the evaluation from the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust; the Robin Hood Foundation provided additional funds soon after. We greatly appreciate their generous backing and ongoing commitment.

We are very grateful to Donna Linderman, the University Associate Dean for Student Success Initiatives and ASAP Executive Director, for her invaluable partnership and collaboration throughout the study. She worked closely with MDRC to launch the evaluation at each college and has continued to play a critical role. We are also grateful to Zineta Kolenovic, currently ASAP Expansion and Replication Specialist, and Diana Strumbos, ASAP Assistant Director for Research and Evaluation, who provided data for the report from CUNY’s Institutional Research Database and have been instrumental in helping us understand the data and key CUNY policies. Daniela Boykin, ASAP Deputy Director, provided helpful information about the program operations throughout the study. Ms. Linderman, Ms. Kolenovic, Ms. Strumbos, and Ms. Boykin also reviewed an earlier draft of this report and provided valuable feedback.

We greatly appreciate the assistance and support of several administrators and staff at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), Kingsborough Community College (KCC), and LaGuardia Community College (LGCC). Space does not permit us to name everyone who has played a role in ASAP and the evaluation, but we want to particularly acknowledge some individuals. President Antonio Pérez and former Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs Sadie Bragg at BMCC; former President Regina Peruggi and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Stuart Suss at KCC; and President Gail Mellow, former Vice President for Academic Affairs Peter Katopes, and Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs Ann Feibel at LGCC have supported the project and provided important leadership. The colleges’ current and former ASAP Directors and Assistant Directors — Lesley Leppert-McKeever and Nadine Brown at BMCC; Richard Rivera and Marie Caty at KCC; and Bernard Polnariev at LGCC — worked closely with MDRC to begin the study on their campuses and have been terrific partners over the years. We appreciate all that they and the ASAP staff at the three colleges have done to support the evaluation and bring the program model to life for participat-

ing students. Several ASAP staff worked hard to recruit and randomly assign students for the study; special thanks go to Denessa Rose and Sandra Rumayor at BMCC, Jonelle Gulston at KCC, and Tyleah Castillo at LGCC.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to the ASAP evaluation and to this report. Robert Ivry, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, and Kate Gualtieri worked with CUNY administrators to lay the groundwork for the study. Vanessa Martin worked closely with Donna Linderman and the colleges' ASAP directors and staff to develop and implement the recruitment and sample intake procedures for the study. She was assisted by Herbert Collado and former MDRC staff member Monica Williams. Joel Gordon, Galina Farberova, Jon Heffley, and Shirley James and her staff developed and monitored the random assignment and baseline data collection process. Herbert Collado and former MDRC staff members Katherine Morris and Shane Crary-Ross participated in visits to the colleges to collect information on the program's implementation. Leslyn Hall, a consultant to MDRC, coordinated the student survey effort and Abt/SRBI conducted the survey. Jonathan Rodriguez worked closely with one of the report's authors on the cost research and Chapter 5. Gordon Berlin, Robert Ivry, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Marie-Andrée Somers, and John Hutchins reviewed early drafts of this report and provided helpful comments. Himani Gupta and Kelsey Patterson assisted in the report coordination and fact-checking. Christopher Boland edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the hundreds of students who participated in the evaluation at BMCC, KCC, and LGCC. We are especially grateful to the students who completed the student survey and shared information on their experiences in college for the study. We hope that the findings from the evaluation will be used to improve college programs and services for them and others in the future.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

Community colleges offer a pathway to the middle class for low-income individuals. Although access to college has expanded in recent decades, graduation rates at community colleges remain low, especially for students who need developmental (remedial) courses to build their basic skills. Nationwide, only about 15 percent of students with developmental education needs attending a two-year college earn a degree or certificate within three years.<sup>1</sup> Many reforms have been found to help students in the short term, but few have meaningfully boosted college completion. This report discusses a program that made a big difference for students and substantially increased graduation rates. Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), operated by the City University of New York (CUNY), one of the nation's largest public urban university systems, is an uncommonly comprehensive and long-term program designed to help more students graduate and help them graduate more quickly. Launched in 2007 with funding from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, ASAP has been implemented at six of CUNY's seven community colleges.

ASAP presents students with both an opportunity and an obligation. Designed to address multiple potential barriers to student success, ASAP provides structure and support for up to three years through the following key components:

- **Requirements and messages:** Students are required to attend college full time and are encouraged to take developmental courses early and to graduate within three years.
- **Student services:** Students receive comprehensive advisement from an ASAP-dedicated adviser with a small caseload, career information from an ASAP-dedicated career and employment services staff member, and ASAP-dedicated tutoring services.
- **Course enrollment:** Students may enroll in blocked or linked courses (two or more courses grouped together with seats reserved for ASAP students) in their first year. Students also enroll in an ASAP seminar during their first few semesters covering topics such as setting goals and study skills. Students can also register for courses early.

---

<sup>1</sup>These data are based on a computation of beginning postsecondary students data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) using the NCES QuickStats website (<http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/quickstats>).

- **Financial supports:** Students receive a tuition waiver that covers any gap between financial aid and college tuition and fees. Students also receive free MetroCards for use on public transportation, contingent on participation in key program services, and free use of textbooks.

MDRC, a nonprofit education and social policy research organization, evaluated ASAP's effects on students' academic outcomes, and its implementation and costs. The study targeted low-income students who needed one or two developmental courses at three CUNY community colleges: Borough of Manhattan, Kingsborough, and LaGuardia. This report shows that, compared with usual college services, ASAP substantially increased enrollment in college and credit accumulation, and nearly doubled graduation rates after three years. ASAP's effects are the largest MDRC has found in more than a decade of research in higher education.

## **Who Is in the Evaluation Sample?**

MDRC used a random assignment research design to evaluate the impacts (or effects) of ASAP on students' academic outcomes over a three-year study period (or follow-up period), compared with usual services and courses at the colleges. The study targeted students who met the following eligibility criteria at the point of random assignment: had family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or were eligible for a Pell Grant (or both), needed one or two developmental courses (to build math, reading, or writing skills), had previously earned 12 credits or fewer, were New York City residents, were willing to attend college full time, and were in an ASAP-eligible major. Each eligible student who agreed to participate was assigned, at random, either to the program group, whose members had the opportunity to participate in ASAP, or to the control group, whose members had the opportunity to receive the usual college services. One group (or cohort) of students was assigned just before the spring 2010 semester and the other just before the fall 2010 semester.

The 896 students in the sample completed a Baseline Information Form (BIF) just before they were randomly assigned. Roughly two-thirds of the students in the research sample are women and most are relatively young. (Seventy-seven percent were 22 years of age or younger when they entered the study.) Reflecting the collective student body at the three colleges, the study sample is racially diverse, with no racial majority. The majority of sample members lived with their parents, were unmarried, and did not have children.

## **What Are the Key Findings?**

Key findings from this report include the following:

- **ASAP was well implemented during the period studied, and the difference between ASAP and usual college services available to the study's control group was substantial.**

ASAP is jointly administered by the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs (CUNY Central) and the participating community colleges. CUNY Central devised the program model and oversees the colleges' implementation of the program. Each college has an ASAP team that operates the program and provides services to students. In addition, a CUNY Central ASAP team leads various internal evaluation efforts to assess the program's effects and to improve the program. College ASAP staff record information about students' contact with advisers and career and employment staff in a centralized data management system. Those data are analyzed monthly and the information is used to help manage and modify the program. College staff also track weekly attendance at tutoring and ASAP seminars and report that attendance information to CUNY each semester. Overall, during the period studied, the ASAP program operated with a high level of monitoring and assessment, with a focus on ongoing improvement.

MDRC found that ASAP's requirement to attend school full time was communicated and enforced, and its messages to take developmental courses early and graduate within three years were communicated effectively. The program provided much more intensive student services than typically available, particularly advising. The implementation of ASAP's blocked or linked classes varied across the colleges, but most program group students took at least one course with a concentration of ASAP students. ASAP linked the receipt of monthly MetroCards to participation in key program services, such as advising. ASAP provided students free use of textbooks, and provided the tuition waiver to those whose need-based financial aid did not cover their tuition and fees. Table ES.1 provides more detail about ASAP's implementation and the differences between ASAP and the usual college services.

- **ASAP substantially improved students' academic outcomes over three years, almost doubling graduation rates.**

This random assignment evaluation, like CUNY's internal study of ASAP,<sup>2</sup> found that the program made a dramatic difference for students. Figure ES.1 shows enrollment rates at any CUNY college for sample members over the three-year follow-up period. The colleges have main sessions, similar to traditional fall and spring semesters, followed by shorter intersessions;

---

<sup>2</sup>Donna Linderman and Zineta Kolenovic, *Early Outcomes Report for City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)* (New York: The City University of New York, 2009); Donna Linderman and Zineta Kolenovic, *Results Thus Far and the Road Ahead: A Follow-up Report on CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)* (New York: The City University of New York, 2012).

**Evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for  
Developmental Education Students**

**Table ES.1**

**Key Differences Between ASAP and Usual College Services  
Three-Year Impacts Report**

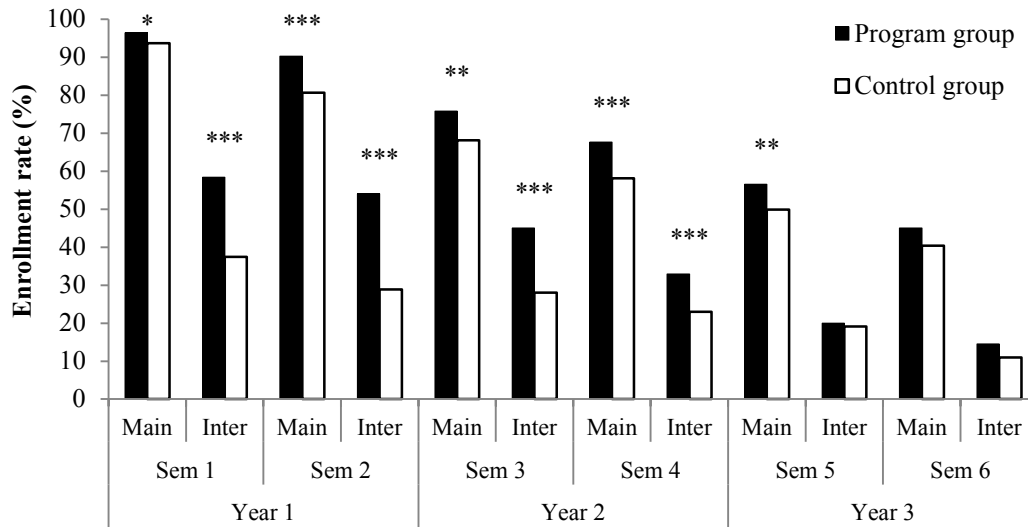
ASAP	Usual College Services
<b><u>Requirements and Messages</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Full-time enrollment:</b> Required</li> <li>• <b>Taking developmental courses early:</b> Encouraged consistently and strongly</li> <li>• <b>Graduating within three years:</b> Encouraged consistently and strongly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Full-time enrollment:</b> Not required</li> <li>• <b>Taking developmental courses early:</b> Encouraged often but not strongly</li> <li>• <b>Graduating within three years:</b> Not typically encouraged</li> </ul>
<b><u>Student Services</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Advising:</b> Student-to-adviser ratio between 60:1 and 80:1; 95 percent of students met with an adviser during first year and students met with an adviser an average of 38 times in that period</li> <li>• <b>Career services:</b> 80 percent of students met with career and employment services staff during first year and students met with such staff an average of 9 times in that period</li> <li>• <b>Tutoring:</b> 74 percent of students received tutoring outside of class during first year and students met with a tutor an average of 24 times in that period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Advising:</b> Student-to-adviser ratio between 600:1 and 1,500:1; 80 percent of students met with an adviser during first year and students met with an adviser an average of 6 times in that period</li> <li>• <b>Career services:</b> 29 percent of students met with career and employment services staff during first year and students met with such staff an average of 2 times in that period</li> <li>• <b>Tutoring:</b> 39 percent of students received tutoring outside of class during first year and students met with a tutor an average of 7 times in that period</li> </ul>
<b><u>Course Enrollment</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Blocked or linked courses:</b> Available for first year; few students took complete block of courses, but most students took at least 1 class with a concentration of ASAP students</li> <li>• <b>ASAP seminar:</b> Most students took an ASAP seminar for 3 semesters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Blocked or linked courses:</b> Available at 2 colleges during first semester; participation in blocked or linked courses unknown</li> <li>• <b>Support seminars:</b> Some students took a freshman seminar or student success course during first year</li> </ul>
<b><u>Financial Supports</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Tuition waiver:</b> 3-11 percent of students received waiver, depending on semester</li> <li>• <b>Free MetroCards:</b> Most students received free MetroCards for use on public transportation, contingent on participation in the program</li> <li>• <b>Free use of textbooks:</b> Most or all students received textbooks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Tuition waiver:</b> Not available</li> <li>• <b>Free MetroCards:</b> Not available</li> <li>• <b>Free use of textbooks:</b> Not available</li> </ul>

SOURCE: MDRC field research data and MDRC student survey.

**Evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for  
Developmental Education Students**

**Figure ES.1**

**Three-Year Enrollment at CUNY Colleges**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from CUNY Institutional Research Database data.

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Estimates are adjusted by site and research cohort.

Enrollment is based on courses in which students are still enrolled as of the end of the add/drop period.

"Main" represents the main session for the semester. "Inter" represents the intersession for the semester.

the figure shows the semesters' main sessions and intersessions separately. ASAP increased the proportion of students who enrolled in college during most sessions of the follow-up period. The effects are especially large during the intersessions. For example, during the intersession of the second semester, 54 percent of the program group enrolled, compared with only 29 percent of the control group. Because control group students enrolled at relatively low rates during intersessions, they left much room for improvement, and ASAP advisers encouraged students to take classes during intersessions to achieve full-time status and to continue accumulating credits. Not shown in the figure, ASAP increased full-time enrollment throughout the follow-up period. ASAP also substantially increased the average number of credits students earned. As Table ES.2 shows, program group members earned an average of approximately 48 credits over three years, about 9 credits more than their control group counterparts.

**Evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for  
Developmental Education Students**

**Table ES.2**

**Three-Year Summary of Credits Earned, Degrees Earned,  
and Enrollment in a Four-Year College**

Outcome	Program Group	Control Group	Difference
Total credits earned	47.7	39.0	8.7 ***
Earned a degree from any college (%)	40.1	21.8	18.3 ***
Enrolled in a 4-year college in semester 6 (%)	25.1	17.3	7.8 ***
Sample size (total = 896)	451	445	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from CUNY Institutional Research Database and National Student Clearinghouse data.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Most important, 40 percent of the program group students had received a degree by the end of the three-year follow-up period, compared with 22 percent of the control group — an 18 percentage point impact. ASAP’s effects are the largest MDRC has found in any large-scale experimental study of a program in higher education. For example, among MDRC’s evaluations of community college reforms, the next largest increase in three-year graduation rates is 4 percentage points.<sup>3</sup> ASAP’s effect on graduation is especially notable given that students needed some developmental courses when they entered the study.

At the end of three years, ASAP had increased the proportion of students who transferred to a four-year college. As Table ES.2 shows, 25 percent of the program group was enrolled in a four-year college in the last semester of the follow-up period, compared with 17 percent of the control group. Whether enrollment itself leads more program group members to earn a bachelor’s degree is an open question, but the step of enrolling in a four-year college is a critical milestone.

---

<sup>3</sup>Reshma Patel, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Elijah de la Campa, and Timothy Rudd, *Using Financial Aid to Promote Student Progress: Interim Findings from the Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, 2013).



The effects described above represent ASAP's average impact across the full sample. ASAP had large positive effects for all of the subgroups of students examined in this report, including those defined by gender, receipt of high school diploma at baseline, and number of developmental courses needed at the start of the study. This finding provides evidence that ASAP was effective for a range of students, including some who tend to have lower overall success rates in higher education, such as men and students with multiple developmental needs.

- **At the three-year point, ASAP was found to be cost-effective; the cost per degree was lower in ASAP than in the control condition.**

A comprehensive analysis of ASAP's costs estimated that the program's services and benefits cost approximately \$14,000 more per student than usual college services over the study's three-year follow-up period. MDRC estimated that an additional \$2,300 was spent on costs associated with program group members attempting more credits than control group members. Despite ASAP's higher total cost (about \$16,300, or 63 percent more than CUNY spent per student on usual college services), the cost per degree was lower because ASAP generated so many more graduates over the three-year follow-up period than did the usual college services.

## **What Are the Implications of the Findings?**

Key implications of the findings include the following:

- **The findings in this report show that a comprehensive, long-term intervention can substantially boost students' success.**

In contrast with many other reforms, ASAP targets multiple potential barriers to students' success by providing an array of services and supports over three years. This approach allows ASAP to help a range of students with different barriers, including students with multiple barriers or different barriers over time. Despite ASAP's incremental cost, the program has a lower cost per graduate than the usual college services because it boosted graduation rates so dramatically — at least at the three-year point.

- **Developmental education students' outcomes can be markedly improved with the right package of supports, requirements, and messages — without changing what happens in the classroom.**

MDRC's evaluation shows that ASAP was highly effective for students who needed one or two developmental courses. The higher education field has been struggling to develop initiatives to substantially help developmental education students, and ASAP has provided by far the most encouraging results of any community college reform that MDRC has yet evaluat-

ed. ASAP provides enhanced student services, including tutoring, and financial supports, but it does not change the curriculum or pedagogy in developmental education classrooms. There is still work to be done to improve what happens inside the community college classroom — and many reforms are being tried — but ASAP offers an alternative approach with great promise.

- **ASAP was designed to help a range of students, and this report presents evidence that it succeeded.**

As noted above, the majority of students in the evaluation sample were relatively young when they entered the study, lived at home with their parents, were unmarried, and did not have children. At the same time, however, the sample included a substantial number of nontraditional college students: 23 percent of the evaluation sample were 23 or older when they entered the study, 26 percent did not live with their parents, 31 percent were employed, 15 percent had at least one child, and at least 6 percent were married.<sup>4</sup> ASAP also generated positive effects for all of the subgroups of students examined.

ASAP requires students to enroll full time. Nationwide, about 40 percent of community college students (roughly 2.8 million students) attend school full time.<sup>5</sup> Some higher education experts argue that many community college students simply cannot attend full time because of family obligations, work, or other issues. This study shows that ASAP boosted full-time enrollment, compared with usual college services — in other words, some students who would have otherwise attended college part time attended full time because of ASAP. It is unclear, however, what the program's effects might be with a different target group, such as low-income parents, who might have more trouble enrolling full time.

## **What Can Other Colleges Learn from ASAP?**

Exactly which program components drove ASAP's effects is unknown. Ultimately, everything in ASAP's comprehensive package of requirements, messages, services, and supports had the potential to affect students, and MDRC's evaluation estimated the effect of that full package. The report, however, explores whether any particular aspects of the program may have been more or less important in changing students' outcomes. This exploration, while much more speculative than the findings presented above, underscores the importance of several key features:

---

<sup>4</sup>Fifteen percent of the evaluation sample did not indicate their marital status on the BIF.

<sup>5</sup>American Association of Community Colleges' Community College Enrollment website (<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Trends/Pages/enrollment.aspx>).

- **Requiring full-time enrollment in college while also providing an array of ongoing supports for students, such as enhanced advisement and financial supports, can yield substantial changes in enrollment and credit accumulation.**

ASAP's full-time enrollment requirement, coupled with multiple supports to facilitate that enrollment, seem to be central to the program's success. It is one thing to tell students to attend full time and hope that they can find the resources to do so; it is an entirely different thing to tell them to attend full time while also covering their tuition, books, and transportation, and providing an array of student services to support them in school. A survey of students about a year after the study started found that 90 percent of program group members believed that they had most or all of the services and supports that they needed to succeed in school. It is unknown exactly how much support is necessary to yield substantial effects on full-time enrollment, but it seems unlikely that such a requirement paired with far more limited financial and student service supports would be as fruitful.

- **Intersessions, perhaps especially in summer, provide good opportunities to increase enrollment in college and credit accumulation.**

ASAP's impacts on enrollment were especially large in winter and summer intersessions. Far fewer students receiving usual services typically enroll in winter and summer than do ASAP students, leaving much room for improvement. ASAP advisers encouraged students to enroll in intersessions both to achieve full-time status and to accelerate their progress through school, and ASAP's tuition supports covered that enrollment. Notable enrollment increases in intersessions have been found in prior studies as well, including a study of a scholarship that was offered during the summer.<sup>6</sup>

- **Requiring students to participate in key program components, monitoring participation, and providing a meaningful benefit to those who participate fully can markedly increase receipt of services.**

During this study's follow-up period, students were required to see their adviser twice a month, meet with ASAP career and employment staff once a semester, and attend tutoring frequently if they were taking a developmental course or were on academic probation. ASAP linked meeting the participation requirements with receipt of a monthly MetroCard for use on

---

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Reshma Patel and Timothy Rudd, *Can Scholarships Alone Help Students Succeed? Lessons from Two New York City Community Colleges* (New York: MDRC, 2012); Michael J. Weiss, Alexander Mayer, Dan Cullinan, Alyssa Ratledge, Colleen Sommo, and John Diamond, *A Random Assignment Evaluation of Learning Communities at Kingsborough Community College: Seven Years Later* (New York: MDRC, 2014).

public transportation. By the end of the follow-up period, each card cost \$112 — a substantial cost for a low-income student. In a city where millions of people travel primarily or exclusively on public transportation, a MetroCard is a strong incentive and very likely increased students' participation in ASAP services. As Table ES.1 shows, the program group had far more contact with advisement, career services, and tutoring.

To effectively link MetroCard receipt with use of student services, it was important to have information about that participation. Using a centralized data management system operated by CUNY Central, college staff closely tracked students' participation in advising and career and employment services. College staff also recorded attendance at tutoring every week. This tracking allowed the program staff to closely monitor students' participation, adjust advisement as needed, and distribute MetroCards appropriately.

- **Monitoring program operations, with a focus on ongoing improvement, contributes to strong implementation.**

CUNY Central and the colleges also used the data tracking system to monitor program implementation, and conducted several internal evaluations. It seems likely that the high level of monitoring, with a focus on improvement, contributed to ASAP's strong implementation and, in turn, to its positive effects for students.

- **Encouraging or requiring students to take developmental courses early in their time in college can hasten and increase completion of those requirements.**

Students in the program group moved through their developmental courses more quickly, and after three years many more program group members than control group members had completed their developmental education requirements.

## **What's Next?**

CUNY has been expanding ASAP, with a goal of serving over 13,000 students by fall 2016. While most ASAP features have remained the same, each ASAP adviser now works with no more than 150 students — more than during the evaluation but still far fewer than the number of students with whom advisers typically work. After the first semester, students are placed into one of three groups based on academic, personal resiliency, and program compliance criteria. The groups receive differentiated types of contact (individual, group, telephone, and e-mail) with a continued focus on maintaining strong relationships with their adviser. Tracking data from CUNY shows that the vast majority of students have maintained contact with their adviser at least once a month.

While ASAP's three-year effects are notable, it will be necessary to continue tracking students' outcomes to learn about the long-term effects. At the three-year point, ASAP may have caused students to graduate who would not have otherwise, accelerated graduation for students who would have graduated eventually, or both. Further research questions include the following: Do program group students continue to earn associate's degrees at high rates? Do control group members begin to catch up? What are the long-term effects on receipt of bachelor's degrees? It is also valuable to know what happens to students in the labor market. A college degree is important in part because of its potential to benefit its recipient in the form of better job opportunities.

ASAP has received much attention in the field of higher education, and many colleges have begun exploring whether they might adopt a similar model. Indeed, ASAP is a highly promising program that warrants testing in other settings. It would be useful to understand whether ASAP can be implemented by other colleges, in different contexts, with different students, and yield substantial effects. To help answer those questions, MDRC is working with CUNY to develop evaluations of ASAP replications at interested colleges.

\*\*\*

ASAP's effects are the largest MDRC has found in any of its evaluations of community college reforms. The evaluation found that CUNY and three of its community colleges successfully implemented a program that generated large, meaningful impacts for low-income students with developmental education needs in an urban setting. With an investment in the right combination of services, requirements, and messages, community college students can succeed at far higher rates. The ASAP model offers a highly promising strategy to markedly accelerate students' progress, increase graduation rates, and build human capital among educationally and economically disadvantaged populations.

## **EARLIER PUBLICATIONS ON CUNY'S ACCELERATED STUDY IN ASSOCIATE PROGRAMS (ASAP)**

*More Graduates: Two-Year Results from an Evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students*  
2013. Susan Scrivener and Michael J. Weiss

*What Can a Multifaceted Program Do for Community College Students? Early Results from an Evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students*  
2012. Susan Scrivener, Michael J. Weiss, and Colleen Sommo

---

NOTE: A complete publications list is available from MDRC and on its website ([www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)), from which copies of reports can also be downloaded.

## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.