

Economic Mobility Catalog: Case Study

Comprehensive supports for community college students: Bronx, NY



Post-Secondary Education & Workforce Development



Post-Secondary Enrollment & Graduation

MORE ABOUT THE STRATEGY USED IN THIS CASE STUDY: [Guidance and supports for post-secondary students](#)

At-a-Glance



Summary

- In 2007, only 13 percent of City University of New York (CUNY) community college students graduated within three years. At Bronx Community College (BCC), the rate was under 8 percent. The low graduation rates meant few students left with the credentials needed for higher-paid, higher-quality jobs.
- Backed by the administration of then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg, CUNY launched the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) in 2007. ASAP uses a range of evidence-based supports to help community college students graduate within three years, including individualized advising, flexible class scheduling, transportation subsidies, and more.
- After an initial evaluation of ASAP in 2015 demonstrated strong results, the next mayoral administration, led by then-Mayor Bill de Blasio, funded a dramatic program expansion, seeking to scale from serving 4,400 to 25,000 students by 2019. At BCC, ASAP was adopted as a college-wide strategy, and campus operations were reshaped with the aim of enrolling all eligible students in the program.
- The keys to ASAP's success included its commitment to independent evaluation, which built buy-in among stakeholders; the initial and ongoing investments by the City of New York, which made piloting and scaling the program possible; buy-in from CUNY Central Office and on-campus leadership, which built support and enabled troubleshooting during implementation; and its comprehensive model and emphasis on advising to promote student success.

- Major obstacles included overcoming initial skepticism from campus staff, hiring advisors quickly enough to maintain low caseload ratios as the program grew, effectively communicating eligibility requirements to prospective students, and responding to significant cuts in funding due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results and Accomplishments

<p>2x</p> <p>Across the CUNY system, 53% of ASAP students graduated within three years, more than double the rate of non-participants. The most recent average three-year graduation rate across ASAP cohorts from fall 2009 to fall 2020 stands at 49.1%.</p>	<p>42%</p> <p>During the fall of 2023, 42% of first-time, full-time associate degree-seeking students were supported by the ASAP program.</p>	<p>6x</p> <p>Between 2015 and 2018, ASAP at Bronx Community College grew to serve nearly six times as many students, scaling from 750 students per year to almost 4,400. When looking only at first-time freshmen, BCC ASAP students graduate at a three-year rate 10% higher than students not supported by the program.</p>
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- **Serving over 100,000 New Yorkers:** Since its inception, ASAP has served more than 100,000 students across the CUNY system. Starting in the 2018-2019 academic year, the program has sought to serve approximately 25,000 students annually.
- **High rate of matriculation to four-year colleges:** 85% of ASAP graduates enroll in a bachelor's degree program within six years of entering ASAP. 93% do so within one year of earning their associate degree.
- **Replication efforts across New York State:** In fall 2023, the State University of New York (SUNY) system announced that it would replicate the ASAP model (an equivalent program for bachelor's degree students) for students at 25 campuses with technical assistance from CUNY. The initial expansion will serve approximately 3,750 students per year.
- **Successful replication efforts across the country:** CUNY has provided technical assistance to institutions in Ohio, California, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia, helping them successfully implement the ASAP model. An MDRC evaluation found that the Ohio replication nearly doubled the three-year graduation rate across three community colleges.
- **Widespread national recognition:** The program has been recognized as a successful community college reform model numerous times, including by President Obama in 2015, by the National Symposium on Student Retention in 2016, by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in 2020, and in President Biden's 2022 Economic Report of the President.



What was the challenge?

- **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%.
- **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.
- **Scaling 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.

What was the solution?

- **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.
- **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).
- **Transforming campus operations and the student experience at BCC:** At BCC, expansion was implemented as a college-wide effort aiming to enroll all eligible incoming, full-time students in ASAP (nearly 4,400 students annually). The CUNY ASAP Office of Academic Affairs (CUNY Central) worked closely with BCC leadership and program staff to fully integrate ASAP into all campus operations, including admissions, financial aid, course registration, bursar operations, and others.

What were the key components of the program's design?

- **Serving community college students:** ASAP serves community college students, with the goal of increasing three-year graduation rates. In order to participate, students must enroll full-time in an approved major, be proficient in Math and English or require a maximum of two semesters of developmental education, meet New York City/State residency requirements, and file for both federal and state financial aid.
- **Offering personalized support:** Students work closely with a dedicated advisor, who can connect them to the personal and academic supports they need to be successful. ASAP keeps student to advisor ratios low, enabling advisors to offer more personalized assistance. Regular interaction between faculty and ASAP advisors ensures that students who need additional support are guided to tutoring and other academic resources as early as possible.
- **Access to academic and career services:** ASAP students have access to one-on-one tutoring and career development services. Additionally, ASAP students entering with developmental needs are required to enroll immediately and continuously in any developmental support offered by the college.
- **Addressing financial barriers:** ASAP offers multiple forms of financial assistance. These include a tuition and fee gap scholarship to cover any gap between a student's financial aid and the cost of tuition and fees, a stipend for textbook costs, and a transportation subsidy.

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“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.”

ASAP Policy Brief

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation

Who were the key stakeholders?

- **Center for Economic Opportunity:** CEO, now known as the Mayor’s Office of Opportunity, provided key funding for an initial expansion of ASAP following success in the pilot phase.
- **City of New York:** The Mayor’s Office has provided stable funding year to year that supported the expansion and sustained scale of ASAP.
- **Bronx Community College:** BCC staff and leadership were integral to the expansion of ASAP to BCC students. Leaders spearheaded the work to integrate ASAP practices across staff divisions and operations.

- **CUNY Office of Academic Affairs:** The CUNY Office of Academic Affairs houses the ASAP Central Office team which coordinates and orchestrates the fiscal administration, policy-setting, professional development, data infrastructure and evaluation agenda, and external engagement activities to ensure optimal program performance and efficiency.

What factors drove success?

- **Supports anchored in 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.
- **Bold initial public investment:** The Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), created by then-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.
- **Unwavering commitment to data collection and independent evaluation:** ASAP has committed to rigorous data collection and independent evaluation since its launch. In doing so, the program consistently demonstrated its clear success to internal stakeholders and local government leaders.
- **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 the academic year 2018-2019.
- **Campus-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 across all staff divisions and operations, facilitating broad campus buy-in as each department revamped its processes and practices.

What were the 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 struggled to maintain the 150:1 student-advisor caseload ratio.
- **Effective communication with prospective students:** Successfully communicating that most new and recently admitted full-time students were eligible for the ASAP program was a marketing challenge. In its smaller pre-expansion state, some students perceived the program as being selective and messaging around the BCC expansion was needed to confront this misperception.
- **COVID-19 Impacts on Funding and Services:** Amid the pandemic, all New York City agencies, including CUNY, were subject to the Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) to reallocate resources in support of the city's pandemic response. Despite these challenges, and modest adjustments to program enrollment to accommodate the reductions, ASAP was fully operational in the academic year 2020-21, converting all program supports and services to a virtual modality with high rates of student engagement.

Timeline



PROGRAM LAUNCH

2006

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

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.

FALL 2007

CUNY ASAP LAUNCHES AT SIX SITES

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.

FALL 2010

RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL BEGINS

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.

FALL 2012

FIRST WAVE OF EXPANSION BEGINS

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 annually.

2014

ASAP REPLICATES MODEL IN OHIO

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.

JANUARY 2015

PRESIDENT OBAMA CITES ASAP AS MODEL

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.

FEBRUARY 2015

MDRC PUBLISHES FINDINGS

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.

OCTOBER 2015

CITY OF NEW YORK INVESTS \$77.4 MILLION IN FURTHER ASAP EXPANSION

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.

2015

SECOND WAVE OF EXPANSION BEGINS

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.

2017

ASAP MODEL REPLICATED IN CALIFORNIA, NEW YORK

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.

2018

BCC HITS EXPANSION GOALS

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.

2020

ASAP MODEL REPLICATED ACROSS COUNTRY

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.

2022

ASAP RECOGNIZED IN ECONOMIC REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

In President Biden's 2022 Economic Report of the President, the ASAP program was highlighted as a model program for increasing community college graduation rates.

2023

REPLICATION ACROSS NEW YORK STATE

In fall 2023, the State University of New York (SUNY) system announced that it would begin replicating the ASAP program (and its equivalent for bachelor's degree students, "Accelerate, Engage, Complete") for bachelor's degree students at 25 community colleges and SUNY-run campuses across the state. The expansion is funded through the \$75 million SUNY Transformation Fund and initially serves approximately 3,750 students.

Implementation Process



How were community members engaged?

- **Dedicated resources for outreach and recruitment:** ASAP leverages relationships with the NYC Department of Education Office of Post-Secondary Readiness (OPSR), college access counselors, charter networks, and community-based organizations to build awareness about the university, partner colleges, and the program. Additionally, ASAP collaborates closely with university admissions, university marketing and communications, and the K16 unit, which partners with high schools to ensure early and widespread citywide awareness. To facilitate

enrollment once students apply and accept their offer of admission to a CUNY college offering the program, ASAP hires recruiters to manage the local enrollment process and outreach. These efforts include the assistance of student ambassadors who engage in tabling, presenting to prospective students, and supporting local program outreach on campus.

- **Continually evaluating student experience and impact:** ASAP Central Office regularly surveys students to understand their experiences and the aspects of the program that are most important to them. Previously, ASAP program leaders also conducted focus groups with students to gain a more in-depth understanding of their perspectives. Additionally, as part of ASAP's regular operations, it conducts internal evaluations to assess its effectiveness, sharing these data with key stakeholders, like university and college leadership, city council members, and the New York City Mayor's Office.

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“When it comes to turning the tide on college completion, few interventions have made as much of a splash as CUNY ASAP, the City University of New York system's trailblazing student success program.”

Michelle Dimino

Director of Education, Third Way

How did this program consider racial disparities?

- **Reducing disparities in college persistence:** Nationally, students of color have significantly higher college attrition rates than white students. By working to address the low graduation rates among CUNY students through individualized guidance and support and supplemental funding, the ASAP program aims to reduce this discrepancy in college persistence across student groups. Outcomes from the first five ASAP cohorts show that participation in the program may help to narrow graduation gaps for Black and Hispanic males.

How was the approach funded?

- **Recruiting advisors:** Once expansion funding was allocated and enrollment targets were set, ASAP immediately began searching for seasoned advisors with at least four years of previous advising experience. BCC leadership sought to hire and train 20 new advisors.
- **Finding students:** To expand ASAP's applicant pool, ASAP hired dedicated recruiters to conduct citywide outreach, built relationships with high schools and community-based organizations, and developed an algorithm to identify potentially eligible students at the point of admission. This ensured eligible students would receive targeted communications describing how to join ASAP.

- **Centralized administration:** As the program expanded, CUNY Central continued to provide overall program administration and fiscal oversight, program-wide evaluation and data management, cultivation of external partnerships, and management of program-wide resource needs (such as public transit passes, textbooks, and promotional materials), among other activities.

How was the approach funded?

- **Annual City and State funding:** In 2006, the City of New York's Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) initially allocated \$19.5 million to CUNY for the ASAP pilot to run for three years. After the program's first two cohorts outperform targets, CEO recommended 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 began allocating \$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 helped 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 and a comprehensive cost study by Teachers College, the de Blasio administration approved \$77 million in new city funding to rapidly expand ASAP from nearly 4,400 students to 25,000 students by 2019. As of 2024, ASAP is supported by a yearly baseline allocation from the City of New York to CUNY of \$84.9M plus \$2.5M from the State of New York.
- **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.

How was the approach measured and refined?

- **Data collection and independent evaluations:** From its launch, ASAP committed to data collection and evaluation; MDRC began a randomized control trial at three CUNY ASAP sites in 2010, and starting in 2014, it started an evaluation of the ASAP replication in Ohio.
- **Cost-benefit analysis:** ASAP was 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.
- **Frequent evaluations and reporting:** ASAP conducts regular internal evaluations and shares monthly reports with key stakeholders, including university leadership, the Mayor's office and city council members, to show program progress and returns on public investment.

- **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 service offerings.
- **Data-informed advising:** On an ongoing basis, ASAP advisement teams review student outcome data 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.

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Learn more

- [PDF version of this case study \(CUNY ASAP\)](#)
- [ASAP program website](#)
- [CUNY ASAP Reports and Publications](#)
- [Inside ASAP Resource Guide](#)
- [MDRC FAQ on ASAP program](#)
- [White House Office of Social Innovation What Works Showcase](#)
- [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab: Reducing community college dropout through comprehensive supports](#)