

Executive Summary

INCREASING COMMUNITY COLLEGE GRADUATION RATES WITH A PROVEN MODEL

Three-Year Results from the Accelerated
Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)
Ohio Demonstration

Cynthia Miller
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Overview

The nation's community colleges play a central role in producing a more educated workforce and promoting social mobility. They serve about 40 percent of all college students and, not surprisingly, they serve a disproportionate number of low-income and underrepresented students. But most students who enter these colleges do not graduate — only about a third of entering students earn a degree or certificate within six years.

Among the many programs that have attempted to increase graduation rates, one program stands out. Developed by the City University of New York (CUNY), the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is a comprehensive program that provides students with up to three years of financial and academic support and other support services. Along with those services and other forms of support comes an obligation to attend full time and participate in essential program services. An experimental evaluation of CUNY ASAP found that the program nearly doubled graduation rates after three years.

This report presents findings through three years from a replication of the ASAP model at three community colleges in Ohio. Low-income students were randomly assigned either to a program group, who could participate in their colleges' new programs based closely on ASAP (called the Ohio Programs), or to a control group, who could receive the usual college services. Comparing the two groups' outcomes provides an estimate of the Ohio Programs' effects.

Findings

- The Ohio Programs were generally managed and staffed as planned and implemented as designed.
- The programs created a noticeable contrast between the experiences of program and control group students in all areas where the model had components.
- The Ohio Programs nearly doubled degree receipt through three years and led to an increase in transfers to four-year colleges.
- The Ohio Programs had positive effects on enrollment, full-time enrollment, and credits earned.
- The Ohio programs had positive effects for various types of students, including those who entered with and without developmental (remedial) education requirements.
- The Ohio Programs cost more per student than usual services, but also led to a lower cost per degree.

The findings from the evaluation add to a body of evidence showing that comprehensive programs that offer academic, financial, and other forms of student support for multiple years are an effective way to increase college completion rates. The fact that the earlier CUNY ASAP findings have now been replicated in Ohio suggests that ASAP in particular can serve as a national model to help students succeed.

Preface

Community colleges provide a relatively affordable college option for millions of students across the country, many of whom come from low-income families and many of whom enter with some need for remedial instruction before starting college-level work. Completion rates are low for community college students in general, but especially so for such students. Many reforms have been tried to help them 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 the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to encourage and support community college students to attend school full time and graduate. The program provides financial assistance, special courses, enhanced advising, and other support services for three full years. The findings from CUNY ASAP were very encouraging and the largest to date found from any program MDRC has evaluated at community colleges: The program nearly doubled graduation rates after three years, from 22 percent to 40 percent.

Can ASAP serve as a national model for helping more students get through college? The findings from CUNY, although striking, are just a starting point. It has become increasingly clear, as the evaluation field has grown and evolved, that findings from one evaluation are not enough to make policy. Programs that might work in one context often do not work in another. Even when tested in the same context, positive effects found in one trial are often not found in a subsequent trial. For that reason, it was critical to test the ASAP model at different colleges and for different types of students.

The ASAP Ohio demonstration provides that replication, and the results are encouraging. In fact, the results are remarkably similar to those from CUNY. The Ohio Programs (as the programs at Ohio colleges modeled on ASAP are called here) also nearly doubled graduation rates after three years and increased transfers to four-year colleges by about the same amount as CUNY ASAP. Positive effects were found at all three participating colleges and for all subgroups of students examined. Although the program cost more per student than the usual services, it led to a lower cost per degree.

CUNY is continuing to expand its program across its own system and beyond New York City, providing guidance to other colleges in New York State and California. MDRC is evaluating one of those efforts to provide more evidence on ASAP. But the findings to date strongly suggest that the ASAP model is an investment worth considering for community colleges nationwide.

Virginia Knox
President, MDRC

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the generous contributions and aid of many people. We are especially grateful to the participating students, who have allowed us to learn from their experiences. The demonstration would not have been possible without the tremendous dedication of the colleges. The authors thank the program staff members and senior leaders across all three colleges for their role in making the Ohio Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) demonstration happen.

We would also like to thank the City University of New York (CUNY) ASAP team, including Donna Linderman, Christine Brongniart, Mary Hiebert, Lesley Leppert, Diana Strumbos, and Zineta Kolenovic, for providing invaluable technical assistance to the project and comments on the report. Brett Visger and the Ohio Department of Higher Education provided coordinating support to the colleges. Katrina Rugless (Cincinnati State Technical and Community College), Matthew Mercado (Lorain County Community College), and Miria Batig and Angela Moore (Cuyahoga Community College) led the programs at each of the three colleges.

We also thank MDRC staff members for their contributions to this demonstration and report. We thank Robert Ivry and Colleen Sommo for their guidance and vision and Michelle Ware, Melissa Boynton, and Alyssa Ratledge for providing extensive help to the colleges. In addition, Leigh Parise, Susan Scrivener, Johanna Walter, and Michael Weiss provided valuable comments on earlier drafts. Sean Blake led the acquisition and processing of data, and Erick Alonzo coordinated the production of the report. Joshua Malbin edited the report and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

We also thank the funders for their support in implementing and evaluating the Ohio Programs. The demonstration is funded by the Ascendium Education Group, Arnold Ventures, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the ECMC foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Haile U.S. Bank Foundation, KnowledgeWorks, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation.

The Authors

Executive Summary

The nation's community colleges play a central role in producing a more educated workforce and promoting social mobility. They serve about 40 percent of all college students and, not surprisingly, they serve a disproportionate number of low-income and underrepresented students. However, although enrollment has generally increased over time, completion rates have not. Among first-time students entering public two-year colleges, only about a third earn degrees or certificates within six years.¹ Most also do not eventually transfer to four-year institutions.

Many colleges have started providing additional services and support to students to help them stay in college and complete degrees. This report provides evidence on one such program, tested at three community colleges in Ohio. Developed by the City University of New York (CUNY), the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) provides students with up to three years of financial and academic support and other support services to address multiple barriers to student success, with the goal of helping more students graduate within three years. ASAP is both an opportunity and an obligation, in that students are required to attend full time and to participate in program services.

An evaluation of CUNY ASAP found that it led to a large increase in graduation rates, with some of the largest effects observed among programs that have been evaluated.² ASAP's success led to questions about whether it could be a model for community colleges across the nation. To answer those questions, it would be important to assess whether it worked as well in another context. MDRC therefore joined with CUNY and the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) to implement and test the ASAP model at three community colleges in the state. ODHE and the colleges were seeking ways to address low completion rates among community college students and appreciated ASAP's comprehensive nature and its idea of reciprocal obligation. CUNY provided in-depth technical assistance to the colleges on the program model and how different components could be implemented, while ODHE coordinated knowledge sharing among college leaders and program staff members at the three colleges. MDRC provided operational support, led the evaluation, and oversaw the demonstration. The project was launched in 2014 and the colleges' programs (referred to as the Ohio Programs) began operating in 2015. Eligible students who agreed to take part in the study were assigned at random to either a program group, eligible for the Ohio Programs' services and support, or a control group, not eligible to participate in the Ohio Programs but eligible for the colleges' standard services.

An earlier report, documenting effects through two years, found that the colleges successfully implemented the Ohio Programs and that, compared with standard courses and services

¹Alexandria Walton Radford, Lutz Berkner, Sara C. Wheeler, and Bryan Shepherd, *Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years. First Look*, NCES 2011-151 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

²Susan Scrivener, Michael J. Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, Colleen Sommo, and Hannah Fresques, *Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

at the colleges, the programs led to large increases in enrollment and credit accumulation in each of the four semesters and more than doubled two-year graduation rates.

This report presents findings on academic outcomes through three years, to assess whether these large effects persisted and whether they continue to match the magnitude of the effects found in New York. The report also assesses the implementation of the programs at the three colleges and presents a cost-effectiveness analysis, assessing the outcomes achieved per dollar spent. In sum, the programs were largely implemented as planned over the three-year period, with some exceptions. Students received the messages about full-time enrollment and on-time completion, and program group students participated in advising, tutoring, and career services at higher rates than their control group counterparts. The programs also continued to have large, positive effects on enrollment, school progress, and degree receipt. In addition, new effects emerged in Year 3 on transfers to four-year colleges. The findings are strikingly similar to those found for the original CUNY ASAP program, suggesting that the model's comprehensive support can be implemented and help students beyond these two states.

The Ascendium Education Group provided anchor funding for the demonstration and evaluation, supplemented by grants from a consortium of other philanthropies, including Arnold Ventures, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the ECMC Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Haile U.S. Bank Foundation, KnowledgeWorks, the Kresge Foundation, and Lumina Foundation.

The Ohio Programs

The Ohio Programs model (based closely on CUNY ASAP) was designed to address multiple potential barriers to student success simultaneously and to address them over three full years. The model as originally planned included the following components:

Student Support

- **Advising.** The programs would offer comprehensive advising from an adviser with a small caseload (about 125 students). Students were required to visit their advisers twice per month in the first semester and as directed based on need thereafter.
- **Tutoring.** The programs would require students to attend tutoring if they were taking developmental (remedial) courses, on academic probation, or identified as struggling by a faculty member or adviser.
- **Career services.** The programs also would require students to meet with a campus career services staff member or participate in an approved career services event once per semester.

Financial Support

- **Tuition waiver.** The programs would provide a tuition waiver that covered any gap between financial aid and college tuition and fees.
- **Monthly incentive.** The programs would offer a monthly incentive in the form of a \$50 gas/grocery gift card, contingent on participation in program services.
- **Textbook voucher.** The programs would provide a voucher to cover the costs of textbooks.

Course Enrollment

- **Blocked courses and consolidated schedules.** Seats would be held for program students in specific sections of courses during the first year.
- **First-year seminar.** New students would be required to take a first-year seminar (or “success course”), ideally with other program students, covering topics such as study skills and note-taking.

Requirements and Messages

- **Full-time enrollment.** The programs would require students to attend college full time during the fall and spring semesters and encourage students to enroll in classes in the summer.
- **Taking developmental courses early.** The programs would encourage students to take developmental courses early in their time in college.
- **Graduation within three years.** The programs would encourage students to graduate within three years.

Findings

- **The Ohio programs were generally managed and staffed as planned and implemented as designed.**

The programs had directors and advisers who worked solely with program group students daily. For the most part, colleges did not employ program-specific tutors or career advisers; students received these services primarily from existing centers on campus. The colleges provided students in the program group with most of the intended program components and services, with the exception of blocked course schedules. That component was not provided as planned in part because students could have up to 24 credits when they entered the study; many of them had already completed various developmental or general education courses that typically would have been included in a blocked schedule.³ Students received the financial support — tuition waivers,

³Colleges often require students to take non-major-specific courses such as math or English. These courses are referred to as “general education” courses.

textbook assistance, and monthly incentives in the form of gift cards — as planned. Students' participation in advising was consistently high over the course of their years in the programs. Students' participation in tutoring and career services was lower than their participation in advising. Over time, however, the staff adjusted the requirements (for example, by allowing the use of online tutoring services) to increase participation.

- **The programs created a noticeable contrast between the experiences of program and control group students in all areas where the model had components.**

Program group students were more likely than control group students to be engaged in advising, tutoring, and career services. Program group students participated in these services at higher rates than their control group counterparts and reported more meetings with student services staff members overall. For example, 63 percent of program group students reported using tutoring services during the first year of the programs, compared with 45 percent of control group students, an increase of 19 percentage points. The increase in the use of career counseling was even larger, at 34 percentage points. Program group students also reported meeting with advisers many more times each semester (about 13 times on average) than control group students (about 5 times on average). Finally, program group students were more likely than control group students to report hearing the three central program messages about the importance of enrolling full time, enrolling during the summer, and graduating in three years. Fewer than half of control group students reported hearing these messages.

- **Program group students were less reliant on student loans, personal savings, or support from family and friends to pay for college.**

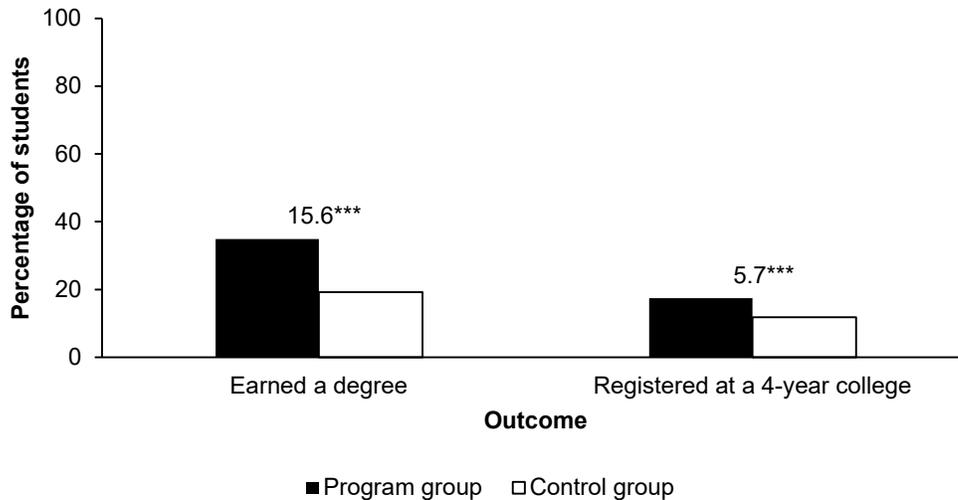
The additional financial aid that students received from the programs led to a number of effects. First, students were less likely to report relying on other sources of assistance — including parents, relatives, friends, and savings — to help pay for college. In addition, students in the program group expressed less concern about their ability to pay for college. As an example, nearly a third of control group students reported that they chose not to register for college full time because they could not afford it, compared with about 16 percent of students in the program group. Program group students were also less likely than control group students to report not buying textbooks because of the cost. Interestingly, the programs do not appear to have reduced students' need to work while in school. About two-thirds of students in the program and control groups worked during their first year enrolled, and those who did so worked an average of 30 hours per week.

- **The Ohio Programs nearly doubled degree receipt through three years and led to an increase in transfers to four-year colleges.**

Effects on degree receipt emerged by the third semester of the follow-up period and increased in each subsequent semester. By the end of Year 3 (the sixth semester), 35 percent of the students in the program group had earned degrees, compared with 19 percent of students in the

control group, an increase of 16 percentage points (see Figure ES.1). As expected, all of the programs' effects on degree receipt are for associate's degrees. Few students earned certificates, and even fewer earned bachelor's degrees or higher degrees during this period.

Figure ES.1
The Ohio Programs Increased Degree Receipt and Transfers to Four-Year Colleges



SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from the National Student Clearinghouse and transcript data from the study colleges.

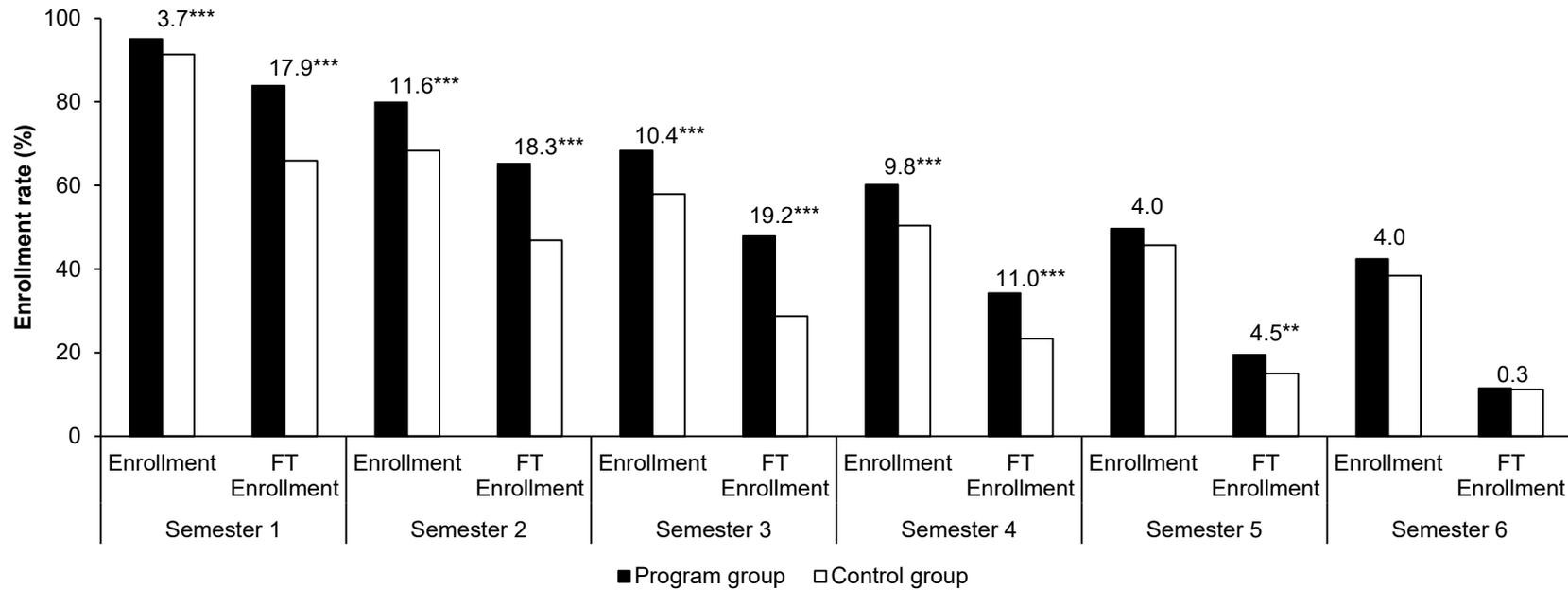
The Ohio Programs also increased the number of students registered at four-year colleges. By the fifth and sixth semesters, students in both the program and control groups began transferring to four-year colleges. But higher percentages of program group students made those transfers. By the sixth semester, for example, 18 percent of program group students were registered at four-year colleges, compared with 12 percent of control group students.

- **The Ohio Programs had positive effects on enrollment, full-time enrollment, and credits earned.**

Enrollment rates for both research groups fell over time, illustrating the challenges to persistence in college faced by community college students. However, students in the program group were more likely to be enrolled and to be enrolled full time in each of the first five semesters (see Figure ES.2). In the third semester, for example, 68 percent of program group students were enrolled at one of the participating colleges compared with 58 percent of control group students, an increase of 10 percentage points. The effect on full-time enrollment was even larger, at 19 percentage points.

Figure ES.2

The Ohio Programs Boosted Enrollment



SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from the National Student Clearinghouse and transcript data from the study colleges.

NOTES: Enrollment is based on all available data and combines spring and summer enrollment.

FT = full-time, defined as enrollment in 12 or more credits and based on data from the college of random assignment only.

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, cohort, gender, race/ethnicity, age, parental status, marital status, weekly hours worked, dependence on parents for 50 percent or more of financial support, whether a student is the first family member to attend college, whether a student earned a high school diploma, the number of developmental education requirements at the time of random assignment, and intended enrollment level.

Students in the program group also earned more credits throughout the period, in part because higher percentages of them were enrolled but also probably in part due to the additional support they received while enrolled and the requirement to enroll full time. The Ohio Programs led to an increase of just over 2 credits earned in each of the first three semesters and 1.5 credits in the fourth semester. Like the effects on enrollment, the effects on credits earned diminish over time and are no longer statistically significant by the sixth semester. In total, students in the program group earned 8.5 more credits over the follow-up period than their counterparts in the control group. To some extent, effects on both current enrollment and credits earned are expected to fall over time as students earn degrees and leave college. As noted, by the end of the sixth semester, 35 percent of students in the program group had earned degrees.

- **The Ohio Programs had positive effects for various types of students, including those who entered with and without developmental education requirements.**

Effects were estimated for several subgroups of students. Of particular interest were effects for subgroups of students with different levels of academic preparation, specifically students who did and did not have developmental education requirements when they entered the study. The program led to increases in degree receipt for students with developmental education requirements that were about the same size as the increases for those without these requirements. The original CUNY ASAP study focused only on students with developmental requirements, so the finding here for students with developmental requirements replicates those results and shows that the program model worked in this new setting for students who were less prepared academically. But the findings for students without developmental requirements confirm that more academically prepared students can also benefit from these types of services and support.

Effects were also explored for several other subgroups of students, defined by college, gender, race, age, and whether a student had a high diploma or equivalent, etc. For all the subgroups examined, the estimated effects on three-year graduation rates were large, positive, and statistically significant, demonstrating that the program is effective for a variety of students.

- **The Ohio Programs cost more per student than the usual services, but also led to a lower cost per degree.**

The direct cost of the programs was \$5,521 per program group member over three years, or \$1,840 per year. This estimate includes \$2,369 for administration and staffing, \$1,517 for student services, and \$1,635 for financial support. In total, after adding in the costs of educating more students (since the programs increased enrollment and the number of college courses taken), the colleges invested \$8,030 more per program group member than they did per control group member. However, that investment also led to a large increase in degree receipt. Thus, the cost per degree earned for program group students was 22 percent lower than the cost per degree earned for control group students.

Conclusion

The findings from the evaluation add to a body of evidence showing that comprehensive programs that provide academic, financial, and personal support to students for multiple years are an effective way to increase college completion rates. Equally important, however, the findings add to the evidence on the effectiveness of the CUNY ASAP model. The effects of the Ohio Programs are strikingly similar to those found from the CUNY ASAP evaluation, providing more evidence that the model works for different types of students. As an example, more of the students in the Ohio study are “nontraditional” than was the case in New York, meaning that the students are older, have children, or work full time. There was some concern that the model, with its full-time attendance requirement, would not work for these types of students, yet it appears it does work. The findings also show that the model can work in a different context. For example, while CUNY is a highly centralized university system, Ohio’s community colleges are decentralized, operating independently and making almost all decisions on their own. Practitioners and policymakers have already recognized ASAP as a national model to increase educational attainment, so it is noteworthy that the model has now produced similar results with different students and in a different context.

The findings also illustrate that the model can be adapted to fit the local context and still have large effects. The Ohio colleges put program components into operation somewhat differently than CUNY did. In some cases, the differences were planned from the outset: For example, the Ohio Programs provided gift cards for gas and food where CUNY ASAP provided unlimited MetroCards for the New York City transit system. In other cases, the differences were the result of adaptations the colleges made as the programs were being implemented, such as not offering blocked scheduling and allowing students to meet the tutoring requirements in multiple ways. However, the general model — of integrated services, other forms of support, and requirements, combined with active monitoring and outreach — was still preserved.

The Ohio Programs cost less than the original CUNY ASAP in New York. But it is worth noting that the original program’s costs have dropped substantially, as CUNY has modified it and expanded it to serve more students within the CUNY system. The CUNY ASAP model is also expanding beyond Ohio and New York City, to colleges such as Westchester Community College in New York and the colleges in the San Mateo County Community College System in California. The model does require an investment by the colleges. However, the findings from Ohio and New York suggest that it is an investment that can help substantial numbers of community college students graduate and help colleges continue to play an important role in promoting social mobility.

Earlier MDRC Publications on the ASAP Ohio Demonstration

*Bringing CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to Ohio
Early Findings from a Demonstration in Three Community Colleges*
2016. Colleen Sommo and Alyssa Ratledge

*Doubling Graduation Rates in a New State
Two-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration*
2018. Colleen Sommo, Dan Cullinan, and Michelle S. Manno

*Steps Toward Sustainability
A Case Study of Lorain County Community College's Comprehensive Student Success Program*
2018. Camielle Headlam

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Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, 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 members 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 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-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

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- 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.