

Doubling Graduation Rates in a New State

Two-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration

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While the United States has made strides in increasing college access among low-income students, college completion has remained low. Graduation rates are particularly low at the nation's community colleges,¹ which enroll a disproportionate percentage of low-income and nontraditional college students.² Only 20 percent of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students at public two-year colleges earn degrees within three years.³

Seeking to address this problem, in 2014 three community colleges in Ohio — Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Cuyahoga Community College, and Lorain County Community College — undertook a new strategy to help more of their lowest-performing students succeed academically. The highly successful Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) developed by the City University of New York (CUNY) provided a model.

ASAP is a comprehensive program that 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. MDRC's random assignment evaluation of CUNY ASAP found that after three years, 40 percent of ASAP students graduated compared with just 22 percent of control group students. After six years, ASAP students continued to outperform the control group, with 51 percent of the program group earning degrees compared with 41 percent of the control group.⁴

The Ohio programs are based closely

on the CUNY ASAP program with a few adjustments. Like the CUNY ASAP model, the Ohio program model as designed required students to enroll full time and encouraged them to take developmental (remedial) courses immediately; provided comprehensive support services such as intensive advising; provided financial support to help students meet participation requirements; and offered blocked courses and condensed schedules. See Box 1 for a list of program components with some definitions of terms.⁵

This brief presents academic effects after two years for the pooled, full study sample in the ASAP Ohio demonstration.⁶ The findings show that students in the program group clearly outperformed the control group with respect to persistence in school, credit accumulation, and graduation. Graduation rates more than doubled: 19 percent of the program group earned a degree or credential after two years compared with 8 percent of the control group. The brief also presents some findings from analyses of the programs' implementation and costs.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

The demonstration launched in 2014 and included the three Ohio colleges, CUNY, MDRC, and the Ohio Department of Higher Education.⁷ The three colleges began operating their own programs in 2015 based on the CUNY ASAP model: CState Accelerate at Cincinnati State, Degree in Three at Cuyahoga Community College, and Students Accelerating in Learning at Lorain County Community

BOX 1: SUMMARY OF OHIO PROGRAM MODEL COMPONENTS

Student Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced advising Enhanced career-development services Enhanced tutoring 	Requirements and Messages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full-time and summer enrollment Taking developmental education courses early Graduating within three years
Financial Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuition waiver Textbook assistance Monthly incentive* 	Course Enrollment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A consolidated schedule and blocked courses[†] First-year seminar[‡]
Program Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managed locally within each college Dedicated staffing 	

NOTES: *The monthly incentive of \$50 (in the form of a grocery/gas card) is for meeting advising, tutoring, and career-development-service requirements.

[†]Blocked courses are seats held in specific courses to allow for the condensed schedule.

[‡]The first-year seminar is a student success course taken in the first semester, designed to introduce new students to strategies for being successful at college that could include goal setting, study skills, and career and academic planning.

College.⁸ The Ascendium Education Group provided anchor funding, supplemented by grants from a consortium of other philanthropies, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the ECMC Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Haile U.S. Bank Foundation, KnowledgeWorks, the Kresge Foundation, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation. CUNY provided in-depth technical assistance, while the Ohio Department of Higher Education 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 evaluation of the Ohio programs uses random assignment — a lottery-like process — to place interested, eligible students into either a program group eligible to receive the programs' services and benefits or a control group who receives regular services. The differences between these two groups' outcomes represent the estimated effects of the opportunity to participate in these programs. Random assignment ensures that student characteristics are not systematically different at the start of the study, allowing differences in later outcomes to be attributed to the new program.

THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY

Students who met the following criteria were eligible for the study:

- They were from low-income families (that is, they were eligible for Pell Grants).
- They were seeking degrees.
- They were willing to attend full time.
- They were majoring in degree programs that could be completed within three years.

New students were eligible for the study, as were continuing students with up to 24 credits. Students were enrolled into the study just before the start of the spring 2015, fall 2015, and spring 2016 semesters, for a total of 1,501 students (806 in the program group and 695 in the control group). As part of the study intake process, students completed a baseline information form that captured their demographic information. Roughly half of the students in the sample are considered nontraditional.⁹ Approximately three in four had at least one developmental education course requirement at the time of random assignment. About 60 percent were employed when they entered the study, with about one-fourth of those working full time. For a full

table of baseline characteristics, see Appendix A. (All of the supplementary appendixes are online only.)

IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

This brief presents findings on how each of the program components was implemented.¹⁰ Data sources include interviews with program staff members, administrators, and students; program records; and college records. Together these data show that across the three colleges, most of the components were implemented as planned. While all colleges had advising and financial support in place as expected, they all struggled in getting students to make full use of the career development services and tutoring, and in implementing blocked courses as planned. Over time, each college adjusted its approach to delivering career development services and tutoring, in particular, to ensure students had various ways to get those forms of support. More detail on the implementation of each component follows. For tables presenting program components and participation data, see Appendix B.

REQUIREMENTS AND MESSAGES

Students in the program were required to enroll full time in the fall and spring semesters, and summer attendance was encouraged. According to interviews with program staff members and students, program advisers emphasized these messages. Over 80 percent of students who enrolled, enrolled full time in their first two semesters, though this proportion dropped to 57 percent by the fourth semester. Program advisers could continue to support students who did not comply with the enrollment mandate, although these students were not eligible for monthly incentives. Program advisers encouraged students to take their developmental courses as soon as possible and to aim to graduate within three years; they helped students reach these goals by planning their schedules with them. About two-thirds of students needing developmental education were enrolled in such courses in the first semester.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Student support services are the heart of the Ohio programs and participation in these services earns students a monthly incentive. Of the three components of student services, advising was implemented with the highest fidelity to the program model and had the highest participation rate among program students.

Advising

Students are required to meet with their program advisers twice a month in the first semester. Starting in the second semester and extending through the end of the three-year program, advisers sort students into low-, medium-, and high-need groups, for which the advising requirements differ. Program advisers, many of whom already had advising experience at the colleges, have low caseloads (typically around 125 students). Advising was implemented as expected across the three colleges, with caseload sizes as planned. Ninety-five percent of enrolled program students met with their Ohio program advisers at least once during the first semester; more than 60 percent met with their advisers six or more times. In later semesters high percentages of students continued to meet with advisers at least once, while on average each student met with an adviser less often. This decline in the average number of meetings was expected once students were separated into groups based on need, since the medium- and low-need groups were required to meet with advisers less often. Program students who were interviewed for the study credited the advising more than any other program component for their success and persistence in college. See Box 2 for one student's explanation of her program experience and all the ways her adviser provided support.

Career Development Services

All program students were required to complete one career-services activity per

“They really look out for you ... it’s like if you do your part they’ll do theirs so that definitely helped.”

BOX 2: PROFILE OF A PROGRAM STUDENT

In her 40s, Sally had been out of school since graduating from high school 25 years ago. She was a stay-at-home mom to her children, who were in their 20s with their own children when she returned to college. Sally had tried finding a job, but none paid a wage high enough for her to support herself so she decided to go college. She joined the Ohio program in spring 2016 and graduated in spring 2018. Sally describes the wide-ranging support she received from her Ohio program adviser: scheduling classes, picking out books, going to the food bank together, sharing contact information for personal resources, and other forms of help. The financial support — especially the money for books and the monthly incentives — was very helpful to her since she relied on financial aid for daily living expenses. Sally describes herself as “clueless” when she started school. “When I first started I had no clue because I was out of school for 25 years. So this was a big adjustment. And now I’m rolling right into it. I know what I’m doing.” However, she worries about how she’ll manage without her adviser when she begins classes at a four-year university.

semester. Approved activities took a variety of forms and the number of options grew as the colleges struggled to get students to fulfill this requirement. Options included meeting individually with a career services staff member; taking an online career assessment; engaging in an internship experience; or attending a résumé-building, interviewing-skills, or job-search workshop. All of these options were also available to students in the control group. It nevertheless remained difficult to get all students to participate in this program component, although participation improved over time. (Participation ranged from 45 percent to 69 percent over the first four semesters.)

Tutoring

Program students in developmental education courses were required to attend at least three hours of tutoring per month.¹¹ From the start, it was a challenge to get students to participate in tutoring as required. Students and program advisers noted that many students had multiple responsibilities outside of school (such as work or family commitments) and found it hard to make time for tutoring. In response, the colleges allowed students

several options to fulfill the requirement: using on-campus tutoring resources, accessing online tutoring, working with an instructor, using a peer or family member, or using a tutor exclusively available to the program students. Expanded options helped the schools increase participation rates among students enrolled in developmental education from 58 percent in the first semester of the program to 72 percent in the second.

COURSE ENROLLMENT

The programs planned to help students with course enrollment by offering priority registration (meaning program students were able to register earlier than other students) and formal blocked courses to ensure program students took courses together. While priority registration was implemented as planned, all the colleges struggled to implement the planned approach to blocked courses and the first-year seminar, in large part because students had competing demands and complicated scheduling needs. Rather than working with the registrar to reserve seats in specific sections, program advisers encouraged program students to enroll in certain sections during an early-registration period.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

As planned, all program students whose financial aid packages did not fully cover tuition and fees were granted waivers that covered the difference. Program students also received financial assistance to cover the costs of textbooks at the campus bookstore (at least \$300 during each of the fall and spring semesters and about half as much for summer semesters).¹² These financial-support components were implemented as expected across the three colleges.

For the monthly \$50 incentive, each campus disbursed gift cards from stores in its area where students could purchase groceries or gas. This component was implemented as planned. Among students who stayed enrolled in college, at least 45 percent received three or more payments in each semester.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

A program director at each college managed the program advisers and reported to the provost or a vice president. In these first two years of operations, the advisers and program directors were fully dedicated to the program. Of the three colleges in the study, one experienced little staff turnover, one experienced a modest amount, and one experienced a significant amount.

Each college used a data-management system to record program participation and generate reports about participation benchmarks that the program staff and senior college staff reviewed monthly. Each college also used its own enrollment and graduation records to track student progress toward program goals each semester and annually.

Collectively, the three colleges convened either in person or over the phone at least quarterly, in meetings often facilitated by

the Ohio Department of Higher Education. These meetings allowed college leaders and program staff members the opportunity to connect with each other and the CUNY ASAP technical assistance team, discuss their progress toward important benchmarks, and solve problems together. Program advisers sometimes also had separate conversations to share their experiences and exchange advice.

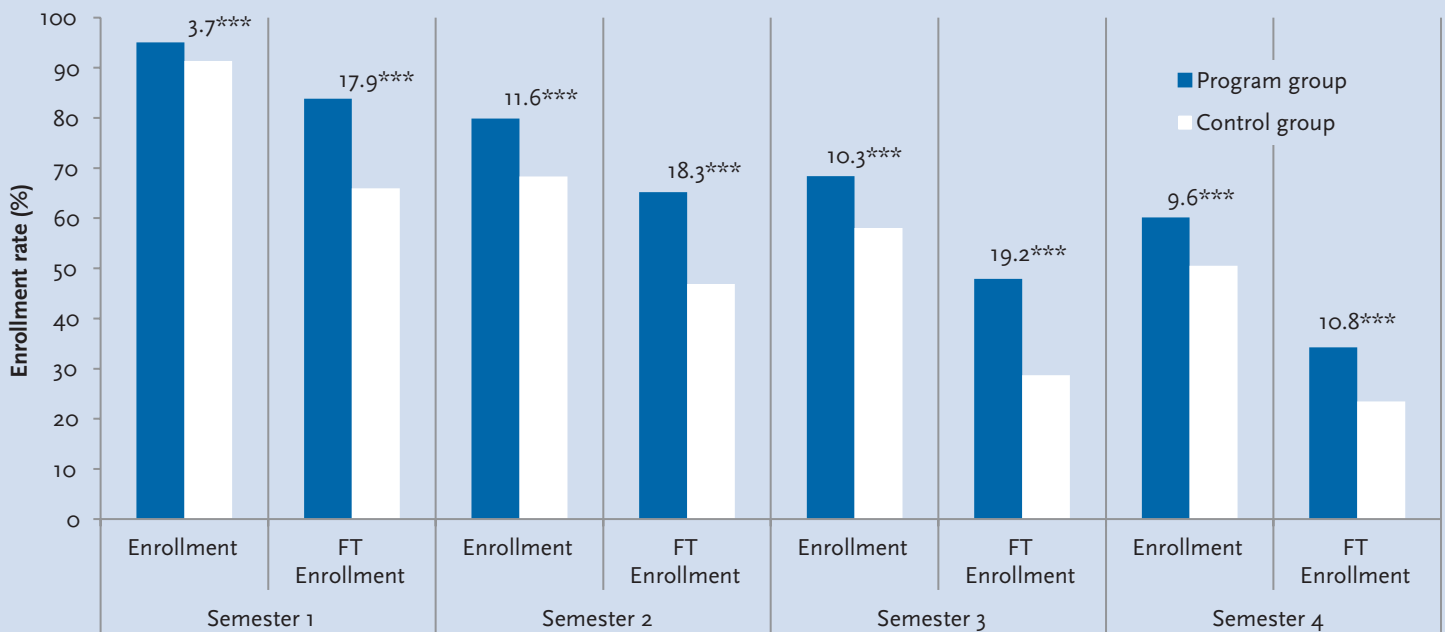
THE PROGRAMS' EFFECTS ON ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

After two years, the program group in this study clearly outperformed the control group with respect to persistence in school, credit accumulation, and graduation.

IMPROVED PERSISTENCE

Figure 1 displays enrollment at any postsecondary institution and full-time

FIGURE 1. OHIO PROGRAMS BOOST ENROLLMENT



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

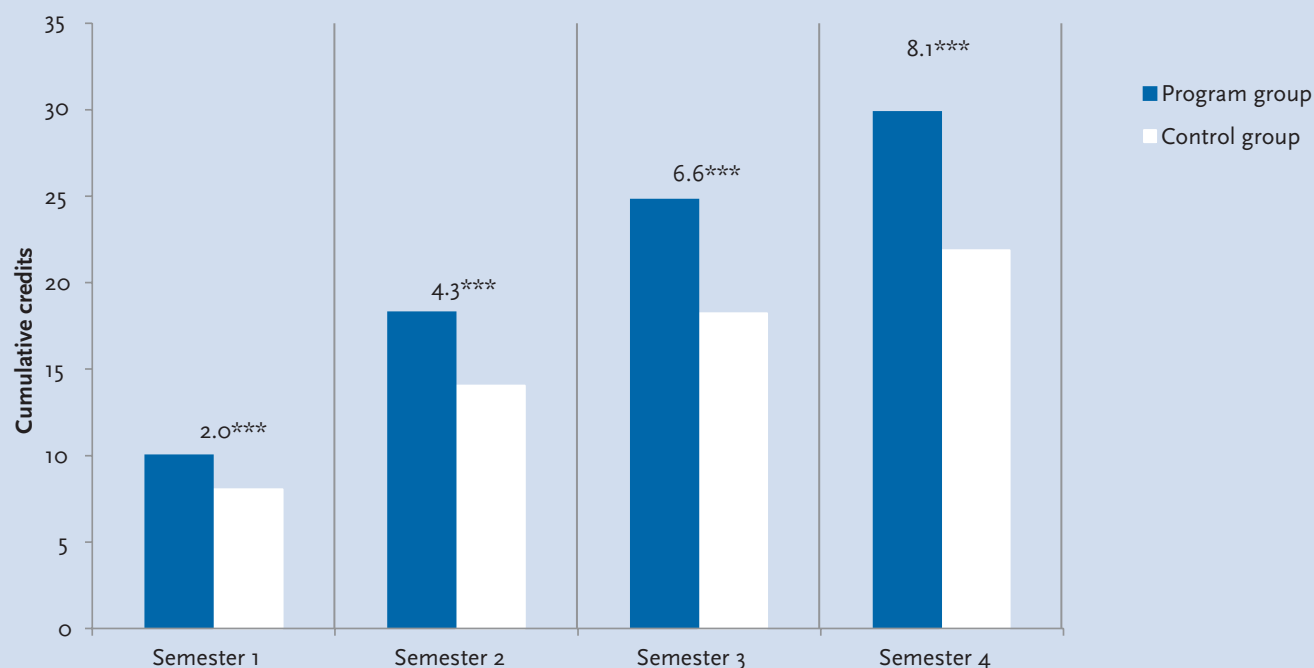
NOTES: Estimates are for the full sample of 1,501 students.

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.

FIGURE 2. OHIO PROGRAMS INCREASE CREDIT ACCUMULATION

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using transcript data from the demonstration colleges.

NOTES: Estimates are for the full sample of 1,501 students.

Credits earned in spring and summer semesters are combined.

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.

enrollment rates at the study colleges during the first two years after students were randomly assigned. Beginning in the first semester, there is a statistically significant estimated effect on enrollment of 4 percentage points. The effect on enrollment grows to 12 percentage points in the second semester and remains above 9 percentage points through the end of the four-semester follow-up period.

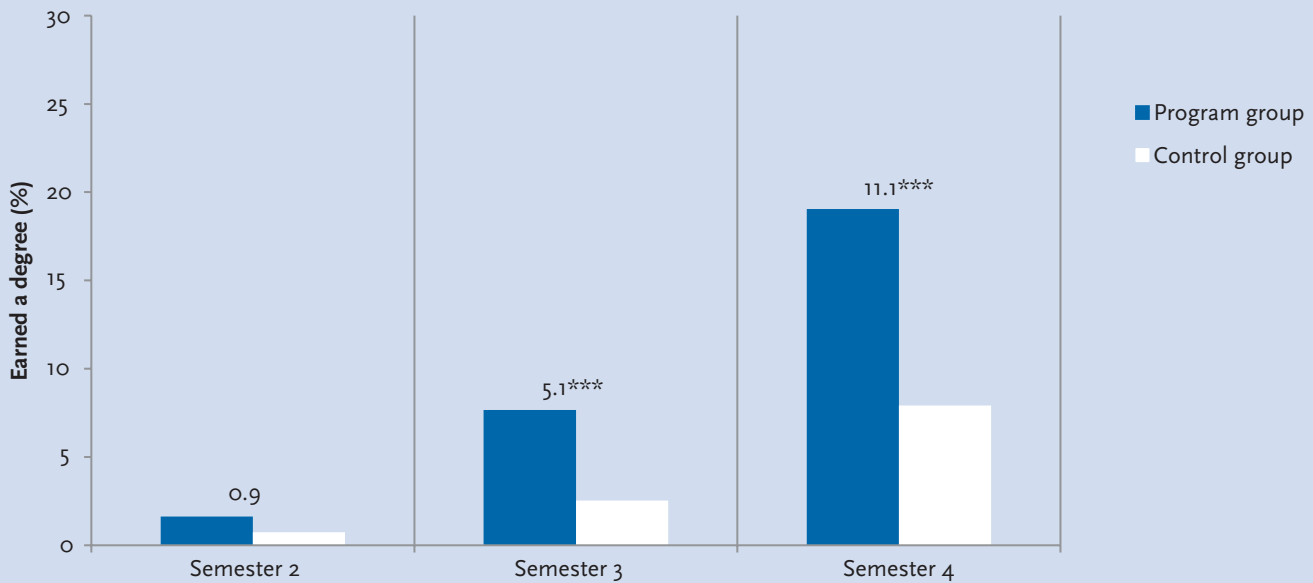
The effect on full-time enrollment, a requirement of the program, is even larger. In the first semester, there is an estimated 18 percentage point effect on full-time enrollment. The effect on this measure remains large and significant throughout the rest of the follow-up period, ranging from 11 percentage points to 19 percentage points. This finding shows that there is a sizable group of students who currently enroll part time but would enroll full time with the right requirements and support.

The program advisers actively encouraged program group students to enroll in courses during the summer, an activity that increases momentum and has been correlated with college completion.¹³ Summer course tuition was covered and monthly incentives were available to students during this time. There was an estimated 24 percentage point increase in summer course enrollment during the first summer after random assignment (an increase from 31 percent to 55 percent), and a 12 percentage point increase during the second summer (from 23 percent to 35 percent; see Appendix Table C.1).

INCREASED CREDIT ACCUMULATION

Figure 2 represents cumulative total credits earned (both developmental and college-level) during the first two years after students were randomly assigned.¹⁴ The program group earned roughly two credits more than the control group per semester, for a total increase

FIGURE 3. OHIO PROGRAMS INCREASE GRADUATION



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

NOTES: Estimates are for the full sample of 1,501 students.

Degrees earned in spring and summer semesters are combined.

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.

of eight credits at the end of four semesters. This effect represents a 37 percent increase in credits earned after two years. To the authors’ knowledge, this is one of the largest increases in credit accumulation — an important indicator of academic progress — that has been observed in a rigorous evaluation.

INCREASED GRADUATION RATES

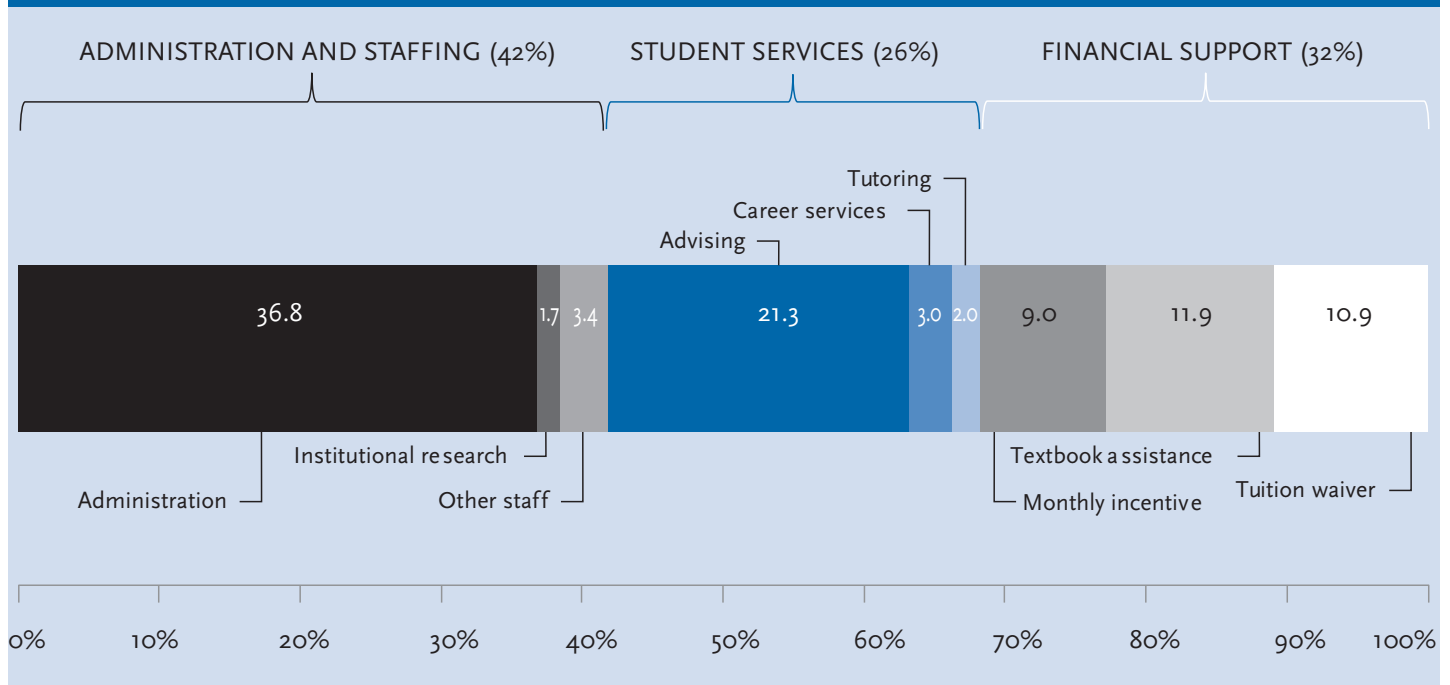
As shown in Figure 3, after two years (or four semesters), 19 percent of the program group had earned a degree or credential, compared with 8 percent of the control group, a statistically significant increase of 11 percentage points. This effect means that two-year graduation rates more than doubled (increasing by 140 percent). Nearly all graduates earned associate’s degrees.

THE EFFECTS OF THE OHIO PROGRAMS COMPARED WITH CUNY ASAP

CUNY ASAP achieved dramatic effects on academic outcomes including persistence in college, credit accumulation, and degree completion. A comparison of the two-year

results from the Ohio evaluation with MDRC’s evaluation of CUNY ASAP shows that the Ohio programs were largely able to achieve the same net effects as CUNY ASAP, and in some cases were able to exceed them.¹⁵ The Ohio programs’ effect on credits earned after two years (8.1 credits) is similar to CUNY ASAP’s effect (7.6 credits). The effect on degrees earned after two years is larger in Ohio (11 percentage points compared with 6 percentage points at CUNY).

The overall outcome levels on measures are different in Ohio than they were in the CUNY ASAP evaluation, which may be a result of differences in the types of students served in the two evaluations, as well as the different structures, resources, and services available to students outside the program. The Ohio colleges and CUNY have different political leadership, governance structures (CUNY is centralized and the Ohio programs operate at three different colleges that are not), and student populations, as roughly half of the students in the Ohio study were nontraditional compared with about a third at CUNY.

FIGURE 4. PROGRAM COMPONENT COSTS (PERCENTAGES OF THE TOTAL)

EFFECTS AMONG SUBGROUPS

In addition to estimating the overall average effect of the Ohio programs, the study measured whether the program was effective for various types of students, or subgroups. Of special note, the study confirms that the Ohio programs were effective for students who were “college-ready” and for students who were required to take developmental education courses.¹⁶ Also explored were effects for the three study colleges; for students of different genders, races, ethnicities, and ages; for students who had and had not earned high school diplomas before enrolling in the study; and for traditional and nontraditional students. The Ohio programs had large positive effects for all the subgroups examined, as shown in Appendix C. MDRC’s evaluation of CUNY ASAP also found that ASAP improved academic outcomes for a range of students. Together, these findings provide strong evidence that this program can be effective for many types of students, including groups that traditionally have low success rates.

THE COSTS OF THE PROGRAMS

Figure 4 breaks down the direct costs of the Ohio programs, which include administration and staffing, student services, and financial support.¹⁷ The total annual direct cost per program group member is \$2,331 (a total that includes program group members who did not enroll). About 42 percent of the direct cost of the program comes from administration and staffing, mostly from senior leaders and the fully dedicated program directors who managed the program and provided quality control. This percentage is high in part because the program was small. Administration would probably be a smaller proportion of the total cost if the program were larger.

Financial support — including the monthly incentives, textbook subsidies, and tuition assistance provided to program students — makes up 32 percent of the programs’ cost. Textbooks are the biggest expense in this category, accounting for just over a third of the costs, followed by the

tuition waivers. Tuition waivers, accounting for \$254 per program student on average, were applied to tuition not covered by Pell Grants or state aid, and most students did have Pell funds because Pell Grant eligibility was an eligibility requirement. Targeting the program in this way enabled the colleges to keep this cost down. Monthly incentives averaged \$210 per program student per year. (A student could earn three to four monthly incentives per semester, but the average includes students who did not enroll or complete all requirements.)

Finally, about 26 percent of the direct cost of the program comes from the student services provided, mostly from the fully dedicated advisers. Tutoring and career services costs are quite minimal, probably because the colleges were able to use their existing resources in these areas.

These costs are much lower than the those found in MDRC's evaluation of CUNY ASAP, in part because salaries are lower in Ohio, in part because of the lack of blocked or linked courses (which had costs associated with them in the CUNY ASAP evaluation), and in part because the Ohio colleges' monthly incentives were valued at about half of CUNY's MetroCards (used for travel in New York City's mass transit system). The Ohio colleges also used fewer advisers to serve an equivalent number of students than CUNY's original model, and may have further reduced costs by using existing career services and tutoring.¹⁸

Appendix D provides additional cost calculations, including base costs, indirect or induced costs, and net costs, as well as alternate calculations of direct costs (see the appendix for definitions of all these terms). All cost estimates are based on data through the end of 2017. The final report will include an additional year of cost data and will present a cost-effectiveness analysis, comparing the cost per graduate in the program and control groups.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The three colleges in Ohio were largely able to implement programs based on CUNY ASAP, and these programs dramatically improved students' academic outcomes over two years. Thus far, they more than doubled graduation rates.

Historically, attempts to replicate effective programs find that replications rarely achieve results similar to the original.¹⁹ The Ohio demonstration has been an exception. The leadership and commitment of the three colleges, the Ohio Department of Higher Education, and the Ohio Governor's Office contributed to the successful results, as did the strong technical assistance provided by CUNY. Additionally, the Ohio demonstration provides evidence that the model can work in a different context and with a different student population, as many more students in Ohio were nontraditional. These findings further validate the effectiveness of the CUNY ASAP model and add to the growing body of evidence on effective strategies for improving the educational outcomes of low-income students.

Much has been learned from these three colleges' experiences implementing their programs. Additional colleges — Westchester County Community College in New York and Skyline College in California — have begun implementing similar programs with technical assistance from CUNY. Meanwhile, in Ohio, one of the three colleges in the current study is sustaining and expanding its program with a goal of making it available to most eligible students in the coming years. A second college is still considering how to sustain the program and meet the financial requirements needed for implementation. And the third college is taking lessons from its experience with this program and embedding them into other broad-reaching programs and policies.

MDRC's evaluation will continue tracking longer-term academic data. A future report will present effects after three years, a cost-effectiveness analysis, and the full implementation story.

NOTES

- 1 The three-year graduation rate at two-year, degree-granting institutions averages 30 percent nationally, while the six-year graduation rate at four-year, degree-granting institutions averages 60 percent. See McFarland et al. (2018).
- 2 National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2011).
- 3 In Ohio, only 15 percent of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students at public two-year institutions earn degrees within three years. See Ohio Department of Higher Education (2014).
- 4 Weiss, Ratledge, Sommo, and Gupta (forthcoming).
- 5 For more background on the origins of the demonstration see Sommo and Ratledge (2016). For a fuller comparison between the Ohio programs and CUNY ASAP, see Appendix B in the accompanying online supplementary appendixes.
- 6 While random assignment occurred at the college level, the main analyses in this brief pool outcomes across the three colleges.
- 7 For more background on the origins of the demonstration, see Sommo and Ratledge (2016).
- 8 Degree in Three operates at two of Cuyahoga Community College's four campuses.
- 9 Nontraditional students are defined as those who were 24 or older, who worked 35 or more hours per week, who had children, or who had not received a high school diploma and were not enrolled in high school at the time of random assignment. Nontraditional students are considered to be at higher risk of not completing degrees.
- 10 The final report will compare the services received by the program group and the control group.
- 11 The data analysis does not account for summer enrollment or for tutoring required of students not performing well in their courses. It also does not account for the fact that the colleges eventually relaxed tutoring requirements for students who were receiving As or Bs in their courses at midterms.
- 12 One college chose to allow students to spend the textbook funds before they used up their Pell Grant funds. As a result, students could get a refund for some Pell Grant funds they had not spent. The other colleges applied the textbook funds to student accounts after they exhausted their Pell funds, which meant those colleges may have spent less on textbooks.
- 13 "Momentum" refers to the intensity at which students initially progress through college, for example, the number of credits students complete in their first year of college (including summer). Research has shown that academic momentum is positively correlated with degree completion. See Attewell, Heil, and Reisel (2012).
- 14 Developmental credits are those earned by passing developmental courses. They do not count toward degree requirements.

15 To compare the current Ohio program results with those found in the CUNY ASAP study for a given outcome at a particular time after random assignment, one can calculate the difference between the estimated effects for each intervention. The standard error of the difference in effects is calculated as the square root of the sum of the squared standard error associated with each intervention's estimated effect.

16 This subgroup was prespecified as "confirmatory" in an analysis plan. See Schochet (2008).

17 Cost data were collected from October 2014 through December 2017.

18 CUNY ASAP's costs have come down significantly over time as the program has evolved, implementing tiers of advising need similar to those used in Ohio and realizing efficiencies of scale. CUNY ASAP's costs are now estimated to be approximately \$3,400 per student per year.

19 Hedges (2018).

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CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Doubling Graduation Rates in a New State Two-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration

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Graduation rates more than doubled for program participants at three Ohio colleges that replicated the City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program. ASAP requires students to enroll full time and provides comprehensive financial and academic support and other support services. This brief presents two-year impact, implementation, and cost findings on the ASAP demonstration in Ohio. The random assignment evaluation shows that students in the program group clearly outperformed the control group with respect to credit accumulation and graduation. Graduation rates more than doubled: 19 percent of the program group earned a degree or credential after two years compared with 8 percent of the control group. Additionally, most of the Ohio program components were well implemented, and the total annual direct cost per program group member was roughly \$2,300, with some variation across colleges. Replications rarely deliver results comparable to those of original programs, but the Ohio demonstration has been an exception, achieving results similar to those of the original.