STEPS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

A Case Study of Lorain County Community College's Comprehensive Student Success Program

I n 2014, as part of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) Ohio Demonstration, Lorain County Community College launched Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL), a comprehensive student success program that is substantially improving persistence and graduation rates among low-income students. Given the program's results, Lorain has committed to sustaining the program and expanding it to serve most of its low-income student population. If the college achieves this goal, it could close attainment gaps between low-income and more affluent students, markedly boost its overall graduation rate, gain revenue through increased tuition and performance-based funding, and, most important, significantly enhance the educational and career trajectories of its students. During early implementation, the college took several steps to fund and institutionalize SAIL that are now making it easier to sustain the program. This brief draws lessons from Lorain's experience to shed light on how other postsecondary institutions may adopt and sustain similar programs to increase student success.
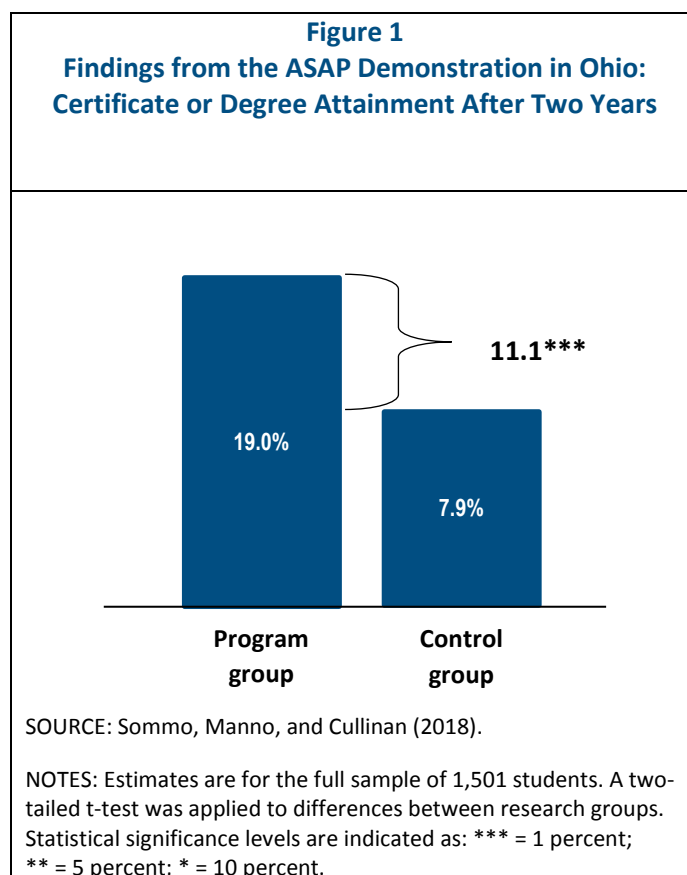
WHAT IS SAIL? WHAT IS ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT SUCCESS?

SAIL is based on the ASAP model developed by the City University of New York (CUNY), which has been proven to be effective.[1] Like CUNY ASAP, SAIL is a comprehensive program designed to address multiple barriers to success among low-income students from the time

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[1] Susan 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).

they enter college to the time they graduate. Both programs require full-time enrollment and provide students with three years of intensive advising, financial support, and other student services. CUNY provided technical assistance to Lorain and two other colleges that are part of the ASAP Ohio Demonstration, helping them develop their own comprehensive programs based on the CUNY ASAP model. MDRC's ongoing evaluation of the three Ohio programs finds that after two years they substantially increase full-time enrollment and persistence in school and more than double graduation rates. (For more information on the programs and their effects, see Figure 1 and MDRC's brief that reports on the results after two years.)[2] These results are in line with positive findings from the CUNY ASAP evaluation,[3] demonstrating that comprehensive programs such as these can significantly improve student success across a range of institutions.

Community colleges are urgently searching for strategies to raise graduation rates, so expanding these programs (to serve larger numbers of students at their current institutions and to serve students at other institutions) is the logical next step. With direct funding from the City of New York, CUNY is expanding CUNY ASAP to serve 25,000 students across nine colleges in its system. Lorain, which received a grant to develop SAIL, is continuing to operate the program beyond the life of that initial grant. The college added over 200 students to the program for the fall 2018 semester and plans to expand SAIL to serve most of its low-income student population — a notable endeavor since the program

Figure 1
Findings from the ASAP Demonstration in Ohio: Certificate or Degree Attainment After Two Years

11.1***

19.0%

7.9%

Program group

Control group

SOURCE: Sommo, Manno, and Cullinan (2018).

NOTES: Estimates are for the full sample of 1,501 students. A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

has a high cost (approximately $2,500 per student).[4]

HOW DID LORAIN POSITION SAIL FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS?

To help fund and sustain SAIL, Lorain took several steps during implementation that are positioning the program for long-term success. In particular, Lorain decided to:

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2   Colleen Sommo, Michelle Manno, and Dan Cullinan, with Sean Blake and Erick Alonzo, *Doubling Graduation Rates in a New State: Two-Year Findings from the ASAP Demonstration in Ohio* (New York: MDRC, 2018).

3   Scrivener et al. (2015).

4   Costs were calculated using information provided in Colleen Sommo, Michelle Manno, and Dan Cullinan, *Doubling Graduation Rates in a New State: Two-Year Findings from the ASAP Demonstration in Ohio: Supplementary Appendixes* (New York: MDRC, 2018).

- Obtain the support of leaders across the college and make the program an institutional priority

From the start, SAIL had the support of the college president, who in turn obtained the support of senior administrators in various departments at Lorain, including academic affairs, student services, and general administration. This cross-departmental support was important for the adoption and early implementation of the program. When early results demonstrated that the program was improving student outcomes, Lorain's leadership team decided to make SAIL an institutional priority. The program was incorporated into the college's strategic plan, discussed regularly at leadership meetings, and made a priority for resource allocation. These actions are leading to SAIL's long-term success at Lorain.

- Use existing resources to meet short-term funding needs

Although Lorain received an initial development grant to help launch SAIL, the college was required to contribute an increasing proportion of the program costs over the course of the three-year project. To secure this match funding and support the continuation of the program, Lorain employed existing campus resources in several ways. First, instead of hiring new tutors and career specialists just for SAIL, it allowed students in the program to receive tutoring and career services largely from existing centers on campus that were often underused. Second, it repurposed institutional dollars from sources that closely aligned with SAIL's goal. For example, the college changed certain scholarships offered by its own foundation from "first-dollar" awards (that is, awards that covered recipients' tuition before other financial aid was applied to their costs) to "last-dollar" awards (that is, awards that covered recipients' tuition

after other available grant aid was applied); it used the money it saved to support SAIL. This change ensured that the funding went toward its intended purpose — supporting low-income students — and compounded the impact of the funds by combining them with services that made it more likely students would earn degrees. Finally, the college identified operating efficiencies that could save the institution money (for example, it renegotiated some utilities contracts), and committed the recovered funds to SAIL. Using resources this way allowed Lorain to cover its short-term costs and ensured that it had some funding secured beyond the life of the initial grant.

- Explore long-term funding opportunities with an eye toward gaining a return on investment

In the long run, Lorain can expect a partial return on its up-front investment in SAIL. Since the program leads more students to remain enrolled in school, the college will gain revenue from the portion of those students' tuition that is covered by Pell Grants. The college can also expect increased performance-based funding from the state of Ohio because the program improves Lorain's performance as measured by student success metrics such as credit completion and graduation. An external study found that after 10 years, approximately 70 percent of the program's costs could be offset by the revenue generated from these two sources. The study also found that SAIL becomes cost-beneficial after 6 years if the government and social benefits of increased educational attainment are taken into account.[5] As a result, Lorain is exploring nontraditional funding opportunities such as financing through a social impact bond — an arrangement in which a private investor provides up-front funding to operate a social program, often one that could save money for a government entity. The government repays the

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[5]   Social Finance, "Lorain County Community College ASAP Feasibility Study Overview," unpublished PowerPoint presentation, May 2018.

initial investment plus a return only if the program achieves predetermined results. This type of pay-for-success financing could help Lorain expedite SAIL's expansion.

Lorain's leaders also reached out to the Ohio Department of Higher Education to explore other public funding streams to support the program. The Ohio Department of Higher Education engaged the Ohio General Assembly, among other entities, in discussions about state-level funding to support the development of comprehensive programs modeled after ASAP at community colleges in Ohio. The resulting proposal was cut from the final state budget; however, Lorain may still be able to use public funding to expand the program by collaborating with state and county social service agencies. The college is exploring a partnership with the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services that would use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding to help cover the costs of financial support for eligible students. This integration of resources could be considered a form of collective impact (when organizations from different sectors work together to achieve a specific goal, in this case improved educational and career outcomes for low-income populations in Lorain County). These visionary but practical funding approaches have put the college in a position to transform SAIL from a time-limited, grant-funded project into a program with institutional roots.

- Integrate the program into general operations and align it with institutional initiatives

In addition to securing funding, Lorain also aimed to give SAIL more longevity by integrating the program into general operations instead of operating it in isolation. SAIL's core staff members — the program coordinator and student advisers — had considerable experience at the college and already knew the college's academic requirements, technological systems, and processes. They were already a part of campus life and could make the program part of everyday operations. Even after they joined SAIL, the advisers participated in department meetings and training sessions for the general advising staff, which helped the program remain integrated with the rest of the college. Furthermore, information and lessons could easily flow from the college's general advising staff to SAIL and vice versa.

In fact, results and lessons from SAIL informed and shaped a redesign of the college's entire advising department. When the program launched, Lorain was focused on student success and completion and had already identified advising as an important area to focus on. A comprehensive program with advising as the core component was a natural fit for the college. SAIL's promising early results and positive responses to the program's advising component highlighted the importance of relationship building, solidifying the college's decision to move to a case management model where students are assigned to specific advisers. While SAIL directly serves the students in the most need, lessons from the program continue to help Lorain serve all students better.

CONCLUSION

Adopting and expanding a comprehensive student success program can be a challenging but worthwhile effort. Lorain sees the SAIL program as a way to help more low-income and nontraditional students succeed. While Lorain is continuing to expand SAIL, the college's experience funding and implementing the program can offer some lessons to other institutions interested in adopting, sustaining, and expanding comprehensive student success programs.

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