

# What Can a Multifaceted Program Do for Community College Students?



EARLY RESULTS FROM  
AN EVALUATION OF  
ACCELERATED STUDY IN  
ASSOCIATE PROGRAMS (ASAP)  
FOR DEVELOPMENTAL  
EDUCATION STUDENTS

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JUNE 2012



## **Executive Summary**

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## **Early Results from an Evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students**

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**with**

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## Overview

In recent years, there has been unprecedented national focus on the importance of increasing the stubbornly low graduation rates of community college students. Most reforms that have been tried are short-term and address one or only a few barriers to student success. The City University of New York's (CUNY's) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), launched in 2007 with funding from Mayor Bloomberg's Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), is an uncommonly multifaceted and long-term program designed to help community college students graduate.

ASAP requires students to attend college full time and provides a rich array of supports and incentives for up to three years, with a goal of graduating at least 50 percent of students within three years. Unlike many programs, ASAP aims to simultaneously address multiple barriers to student success over many semesters. The program model includes some block-scheduled classes for ASAP students for the first year of the program; an ASAP seminar for at least the first year, which covers such topics as goal-setting and academic planning; comprehensive advisement; tutoring; career services; a tuition waiver that covers any gap between a student's financial aid and tuition and fees; free MetroCards for use on public transportation; and free use of textbooks.

This report presents very promising early findings from a random assignment study of ASAP at three CUNY community colleges: Borough of Manhattan, Kingsborough, and LaGuardia. For the study, ASAP targets low-income students who need one or two developmental (remedial) courses to build their reading, writing, or math skills. The study compares ASAP with regular services and classes at the colleges. Key findings include effects on:

- **Full-time enrollment.** During the study's first semester, ASAP increased full-time enrollment by 11 percentage points: 96 percent of the students assigned to ASAP enrolled full time, compared with 85 percent of the comparison group.
- **Credits earned and completing developmental coursework.** ASAP increased the average number of credits earned during the first semester by 2.1 credits and increased the proportion of students who completed their developmental coursework by the end of that semester by 15 percentage points.
- **Semester-to-semester retention.** ASAP increased the proportion of students who enrolled in college during the second semester by 10 percentage points and increased full-time enrollment that semester by 21 percentage points.

ASAP's early effects are larger than the effects of most of the community college programs MDRC has studied previously. ASAP's comprehensive package of financial aid, services, and supports, together with its full-time attendance requirement, has resulted in students taking and passing more credits than they would have otherwise. Future reports will show whether these effects can be sustained — or even grow — as students continue in this comprehensive, three-year program.



## Preface

Community colleges across the country confront a clear challenge: too many students arrive on campus unprepared, get placed into developmental (or remedial) courses where they stagnate, attend only part time (because of work or other responsibilities), and never complete a credential, graduate, or transfer to a four-year institution. At the same time, community colleges are subject to increasing expectations — and increased scrutiny — about their ability to develop a better-educated and credentialed workforce.

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

This report provides early findings from MDRC’s random assignment evaluation of ASAP at three CUNY community colleges, targeted to low-income students who need at least one developmental course in reading, writing, or math to build college-level skills. The results are very encouraging; for instance, after only one semester, ASAP has increased the proportion of students who have completed their developmental education courses by 15 percentage points — meaning that 15 more students out of every 100 are ready to take college-level courses. In addition, ASAP increased the number of credits students earned during the first semester and boosted their rates of full-time enrollment in the first and second semesters. These are some of the largest short-term effects we’ve seen in an evaluation of a community college program.

Recent research by MDRC and others suggests that comprehensive, intensive, and extended interventions may be necessary to substantially improve achievement among community college students in the long run. These early results from our evaluation of ASAP provide hope that its package of supports and services — and its strong message about full-time attendance — are putting students on the right track. Future reports will document whether that hope is fulfilled.

In the meantime, CUNY is using lessons learned from ASAP to inform the development of a new community college opening in the fall of 2012 — as well as expanding the program in its six existing community colleges to serve more than 4,000 students by 2014.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President





## Acknowledgments

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

We are very grateful to Donna Linderman, the ASAP University Executive Director, for her invaluable partnership and collaboration on the study. She worked closely with MDRC to launch the evaluation at each college and has continued to play a critical role. We are also grateful to Zineta Kolenovic, ASAP Assistant Director for Research and Evaluation, who provided data for the report from CUNY's Institutional Research Database and has been instrumental in helping us understand the data and key CUNY policies. Donna and Zineta also reviewed an earlier draft of this report and provided valuable feedback.

We greatly appreciate the assistance and support of several administrators and staff at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), Kingsborough Community College (KCC), and LaGuardia Community College (LGCC). Space does not permit us to name everyone who has played a role in ASAP and the evaluation, but we want to particularly acknowledge some individuals. President Antonio Pérez and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs Sadie Bragg at BMCC; President Regina Peruggi and Vice President for Academic Affairs Stuart Suss at KCC; and President Gail Mellow, Vice President for Academic Affairs Peter Katopes, and Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs Ann Feibel at LGCC have supported the project and provided important leadership. The colleges' ASAP Directors — Lesley Leppert-McKeever at BMCC, Richard Rivera at KCC, and Bernard Polnariiev at LGCC, who recently moved to another position at the college — worked closely with MDRC to begin the study on their campuses and have been terrific partners. We appreciate all that they and the ASAP staff at the three colleges have done to support the evaluation and bring the program model to life for participating students. Several ASAP staff worked hard to recruit and randomly assign students for the study; special thanks go to Denessa Rose at BMCC, Jonelle Gulston at KCC, and Tyleah Castillo at LGCC. Sandra Rumayor, the Director of the Evening/Weekend Program at BMCC, also helped recruit students for the study.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to the ASAP evaluation and to this report. Robert Ivry, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, and Kate Gualtieri worked with CUNY administrators to lay the groundwork for the study. Vanessa Martin worked closely with Donna Linderman and the colleges' ASAP directors and staff to develop and implement the recruitment and sample intake procedures for the study. She was assisted by Herbert Collado and Monica Cuevas. Joel Gordon, Galina Farberova, Jon Heffley, and Shirley James and her staff developed and monitored the random assignment and baseline data collection process. Gordon Berlin, Rob Ivry, Thomas Brock, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, and John Hutchins reviewed earlier drafts of this report and provided helpful comments. Alyssa Ratledge and Katherine Morriss assisted in the production of the report and Alyssa conducted fact-checking. Shane Crary-Ross advised Alyssa on the report production process. John Hutchins edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the hundreds of students who are participating in the evaluation at BMCC, KCC, and LGCC. We hope that the findings from the evaluation will be used to improve college programs and services for them and others in the future.

The Authors

## **Executive Summary**

In recent years, there has been unprecedented national focus on the importance of increasing graduation rates for community college students. Many reforms have been tried, but college completion rates remain stubbornly low: Only one-third of entering students graduate with a degree or certificate within five years. Reforms are often short-term, lasting one or two semesters, and are designed to address one or only a few barriers to student success. Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), operated by The City University of New York (CUNY), the nation's largest public urban university system, is an uncommonly multifaceted and long-term program aimed at helping community college students stay in school and graduate. Launched in 2007 with funding from Mayor Bloomberg's Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), the program was designed to substantially increase the proportion of students who graduate and to help them graduate sooner.

This report presents very promising early findings from a random assignment study of ASAP that is taking place at three CUNY community colleges: Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), Kingsborough Community College (KCC), and LaGuardia Community College (LGCC). For the study, ASAP targets low-income students who need one or two developmental (remedial) courses to build their math, reading, or writing skills and are willing to attend school full time. Compared with regular college services, ASAP increased full-time enrollment and the number of credits earned in the first semester of the study, helped students complete their developmental requirements that semester, and increased enrollment in the second semester. ASAP's early effects are large, compared with the effects of other community college reforms MDRC has studied.

### **ASAP Model**

ASAP requires students to attend college full time and provides a rich array of supports and incentives for up to three years. Unlike many programs, ASAP is designed to simultaneously address multiple potential barriers to student success and to address them over many semesters. ASAP's goal is to graduate at least 50 percent of participating students within three years, far exceeding typical graduation rates for low-income developmental students.

The description below of ASAP's components is of the program as designed. The evaluation's research on how ASAP is operated by the colleges is still in progress, but early data suggest that ASAP has been generally well implemented, with some variation across the components and across the campuses, as is allowed for in the model.

- **Messages and requirements.** ASAP requires students to enroll full time every fall and spring semester. The program encourages students to take their developmental courses early and to graduate within three years.
- **Course enrollment.** Cohorts of students organized by major take three or more courses together in a consolidated block schedule during their first year in ASAP. For at least the first year of the program, students are required to take a non-credit ASAP seminar that covers such topics as goal-setting and academic planning.
- **Student services.** Students receive comprehensive advisement from their ASAP adviser, who has a small caseload (60-80 students). Students are required to meet with their adviser at least twice a month. ASAP tutors provide general support and conduct review sessions for some courses, and some ASAP students are required to attend tutoring frequently. ASAP career and employment specialists help with career planning and, if needed, job placement. Students are required to meet with the career and employment specialist at least once a semester.
- **Financial supports.** Any gap between a student's financial aid and tuition and fees is waived, essentially ensuring that all of each student's tuition and fees are covered. Students also receive free monthly MetroCards for use on public transportation. The MetroCard is tied to fulfilling certain program requirements, such as meeting with an adviser or attending tutoring. Students also receive free textbooks for their classes (which they must return at the end of the semester).

## **ASAP Evaluation and Research Sample**

ASAP originally targeted students at CUNY's six community colleges who were "college-ready" when they entered the program (that is, they did not need any developmental coursework). CUNY's internal evaluation of ASAP found promising effects for participating students, and CUNY decided to expand the program and commission an external evaluation. For the evaluation, ASAP targets exclusively students who need developmental education.

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research firm, is using a random assignment research design to study the impacts (or effects) of ASAP, compared with standard services and courses at the colleges, on students' academic outcomes over a three-year period. This report examines impacts during students' first and second semesters in the study based on student transcripts and CUNY Assessment Tests.

For the study, ASAP targets students at BMCC, KCC, and LGCC who met the following eligibility criteria at the point of random assignment: had family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and/or were eligible for a Pell grant, needed one or two developmental courses based on CUNY Assessment Tests, was a new student or a continuing student who had earned 12 or fewer credits, was a New York City resident, was willing to attend college full time, and was in an ASAP-eligible major (the colleges excluded a few majors that have requirements that make graduating quickly difficult). Each eligible student who agreed to participate was assigned, at random, either to the program group, whose members have the opportunity to participate in ASAP, or to the control group, whose members receive the colleges' standard services. Generally, like at most community colleges, the standard services are far less intensive than ASAP's. The colleges randomly assigned students at two points in time: One group (or cohort) of students was assigned just before the spring 2010 semester and the other just before the fall 2010 semester.

The 896 students in the sample completed a baseline demographic survey just before they were randomly assigned. Roughly two-thirds of the students in the research sample are women and most are relatively young (83 percent were 24 years old or younger when they entered the study). Reflecting the student body at the three colleges, the study sample is racially and ethnically diverse, with no racial or ethnic majority. Virtually all the sample members said they planned to obtain a degree beyond an associate's degree.

## **Overview of ASAP's Early Impacts**

This section summarizes the key impact findings. All of the impacts discussed below are statistically significant, meaning that they are unlikely to have arisen by chance.

- **During the first semester, ASAP increased the proportion of students who enrolled full time and increased the average number of credits students earned.**

As Table ES.1 shows, during the first semester of the follow-up period, 96 percent of the program group enrolled in college full time (12 or more credits), compared with 85 percent of the control group, yielding an impact of 11 percentage points. As noted above, willingness to enroll full time was an eligibility requirement for the study. However, this willingness does not always translate into actual full-time enrollment; ASAP increased the proportion of students who followed through. The impact on full-time enrollment is important, as past research has found that part-time enrollment is associated with lower rates of persistence and progress in college.

Not surprisingly given the increase in full-time enrollment, program group members attempted more credits during the first semester. They also earned more credits and thus made

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

**Table ES.1**

**Early Impacts on Selected Academic Outcomes**

Outcome	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)
<b><u>First semester</u></b>			
Enrolled <sup>a</sup> (%)	96.4	94.0	2.5 *
Full time	95.8	85.2	10.6 ***
Part time	0.6	8.8	-8.1 ***
Total credits attempted	16.1	13.9	2.2 ***
College-level credits	10.5	10.3	0.2
Developmental credits	5.6	3.6	2.0 ***
Total credits earned	11.4	9.3	2.1 ***
College-level credits	8.5	7.6	0.9 ***
Developmental credits	2.9	1.7	1.1 ***
Completed developmental requirements <sup>b</sup> (%)	46.6	31.9	14.7 ***
<b><u>Second semester</u></b>			
Enrolled <sup>a</sup> (%)	90.3	80.4	9.8 ***
Full time	80.5	59.8	20.6 ***
Part time	9.8	20.6	-10.8 ***
Total credits attempted	11.8	9.9	1.9 ***
College-level credits	10.0	8.3	1.7 ***
Developmental credits	1.8	1.6	0.3
Sample size (total = 896)	451	445	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from CUNY Institutional Research Database (IRDB).

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

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

Estimates are adjusted by site and cohort.

First semester measures include the main session and intersession. Second semester measures do not include intersession data and are subject to change.

“Developmental credits” are credits associated with developmental reading, writing, and math courses; English as a Second Language classes; and a small number of other non-college-level courses. CUNY refers to these credits as “equated credits.”

<sup>a</sup>Enrollment is based on courses that students are still enrolled in as of the end of the add/drop period. Full-time enrollment is defined as enrollment in 12 or more credits. Part-time enrollment is defined as enrollment in fewer than 12 credits.

<sup>b</sup>Completion of developmental requirements is contingent upon passing CUNY Assessment Tests, passing the highest level of developmental education, and/or passing a college-level class in each subject. This measure includes students who passed CUNY Assessment Tests prior to the first semester.

more progress. Program group members earned an average of 11.4 total credits in the first semester, 2.1 credits more than the control group — 0.9 college-level credits and 1.1 credits in developmental courses. Developmental courses do not provide college-level credits but instead provide what are called “equated credits” at CUNY, which count toward part-time/full-time status and for tuition and financial aid purposes. Earning these credits, referred to as “developmental credits” in this report, is an important indicator of progress through developmental education. As mentioned above, one of the eligibility criteria for the study was being in need of one or two developmental courses. Before students begin classes, they take the CUNY Assessment Tests, designed to measure basic skills proficiency in reading, writing, and math. Typically students at CUNY’s community colleges who fail the tests are not required to take developmental courses when they *start* school, but they must complete any developmental courses before they can take certain gatekeeper courses, such as freshman English, college algebra, and most humanities courses, and before they can graduate or transfer to a CUNY four-year school.

- **ASAP increased the proportion of students who had completed all of their developmental requirements by the end of the first semester.**

As Table ES.1 shows, 47 percent of the program group had completed their developmental requirements, compared with 32 percent of the control group. After only one semester, ASAP helped a substantial number of students reach this important milestone.

- **ASAP increased the proportion of students who returned to school in the second semester.**

All three colleges have “main sessions” (like traditional fall and spring terms) followed by shorter “intersessions.” The data for the second semester that were analyzed for this report include only the main session at each college (data for the first semester includes both the main session and the intersession). As Table ES.1 shows, 90 percent of the program group members enrolled during the main session of the second semester, compared with 80 percent of the control group members, a difference of 10 percentage points. The vast majority of the program group students enrolled full time: 81 percent, compared with only 60 percent of the control group, yielding a substantial impact of 21 percentage points. Since intersession credits count toward full-time status, these percentages will change as more data become available. It is unlikely, though, that the additional data will change the finding that ASAP positively affected second-semester enrollment. During the second semester, the program increased the average number of credits that students attempted. (Data on earned credits in the second semester were not yet available for the full sample when the analysis for the report was completed.)

- **For the first cohort of sample members, ASAP increased credits earned during the second semester and increased the proportion of students who enrolled in school in the third semester.**

An additional semester of follow-up data was available for the first cohort of students in the study, assigned just before the spring 2010 semester, which comprises approximately one-third of the full sample. Results for the first cohort (not shown) suggest that ASAP is likely to continue having positive effects, at least through the start of the third semester.

## **Conclusions and What's Next**

ASAP's early effects on students' academic outcomes are very promising, and it is clear at this juncture that ASAP's package of requirements, messages, services, and financial benefits can improve short-term outcomes. In fact, ASAP's effect on the average number of total credits students earned during the first semester is larger than the effect of any of the other community college programs that MDRC has studied. ASAP's effect on second-semester enrollment rates is the second largest MDRC has found. Based on ASAP's effects for students to date — those in the MDRC random assignment study as well as students in prior entering cohorts — CUNY is expanding the program to serve over 4,000 students by 2014, three times its current size.

Future reports will present findings on longer-term academic outcomes, including two- and three-year graduation rates. MDRC's evaluation will also examine the implementation of ASAP and the key differences between ASAP and standard college services and courses. Although the evaluation is not designed to definitively determine which components of ASAP matter the most — because the entire ASAP package is being compared with services as usual — the implementation research will shed light on that issue. Finally, MDRC will also examine the costs of ASAP. Given that ASAP is multifaceted and lasts three years, it is likely to be more expensive than most other programs studied. It may also, however, generate more substantial effects.



## About MDRC

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

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

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

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

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