



ASAP

A Successful Multi-Faceted Innovation to Promote Equity in
Affordability, Persistence, and Completion

HEA Issue Brief Series

**Opportunities for Addressing Postsecondary Student Poverty in the Higher
Education Act (HEA)**



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What's at stake

To compete for decent-paying jobs, today's students—particularly those coming from low-income families—need more than a high school education. In fact, the odds of living in poverty can be reduced by 20 to 30 percent with some college attendance or by earning an associate's degree rather than a high school diploma or equivalency.¹ However, public policies all too often rely on outdated assumptions that fail to incorporate the characteristics of, and challenges faced by, low-income students. Today's students have significant non-academic demands, may be academically unprepared for school, and/or may be pursuing college after taking time away from school. The complexities in students' lives necessitate policies that support them across multiple dimensions—financial as well as academic, social, and personal (even basic) needs.

Supporting students holistically improves their academic success and makes them more likely to persist and complete. However, college administrators too often overlook these supplemental services or view them as expendable costs, particularly when budgets are tight. Many low-income students need additional supports but tend to go to resource-starved open-access institutions. The proliferation of free college (sometimes called “Promise” or “College Promise”) programs have provided low-income students with needed tuition assistance, which supports their ability to persist in their education, but these programs may provide limited opportunities for the broader range of supports that low-income students also need. The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative, which this paper discusses, combines both financial and student supports to help underprepared students persist in and complete college. This brief describes how ASAP is a highly effective strategy for low-income students that is also cost-effective for institutions.

Supporting students holistically through ASAP

ASAP began at the City University of New York (CUNY) and, as a result of its success, the model has since expanded to Ohio. (In 2018 two additional colleges will begin offering ASAP: Westchester Community College in New York, and Skyline College in California.) The program provides grants to students for tuition and fees through a “last-dollar” formula like that of some Promise programs, which means it subsidizes student expenses up to the cost of tuition and fees after all other grant aid is applied. Students also receive subsidies to pay for transportation and textbooks.

Beyond the financial assistance it provides students, ASAP does much more: it comprehensively engages low-income students in need of remediation in zero, one, or two developmental areas (math, reading, or writing), and provides them with student supports to complete an associate's degree program in three years. ASAP promotes academic success by providing tutors and career counseling, ensuring personal advisors have small caseloads, and supporting students as they transfer to a four-year degree program or secure employment. The program aims to get students through remedial courses as quickly as possible. Participating students must attempt at least one remedial course (at no cost) as an on-ramp to college, which they take the summer or winter before starting their credit-bearing work full-time; they also must take remedial courses in their first two semesters, rather than delaying them.² CUNY's investment across all of these services is an additional \$5,400 per student annually. However, a cost-benefit analysis determined that for each dollar invested in ASAP, the program returned 3 to 4 dollars.³

ASAP succeeds because students are required to attend full-time in a cohort-based structure as they work toward one of the program-supported majors. They are encouraged (but not required) to attend classes during winter and summer breaks. While federal financial aid may not be available during those times, financial and other supports provided by ASAP help make attendance possible between sessions. To participate, students must have completed 15 or fewer college credits (24 in Ohio). Previously, students were also required to have a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and/or be eligible to receive a Pell Grant, although they are still required to apply for financial aid.

MDRC evaluations showed the versions of ASAP in both New York and Ohio to be highly successful and with little difference in their levels of success. The differences between the CUNY and Ohio initiatives studied in the evaluations were largely demographic—three-quarters of CUNY students were either Hispanic or Black, whereas close to half of the Ohio students were White. Ohio students also tended to be older and thus more likely to have children and significantly more likely to be employed. Students in both programs were largely female (62 percent in New York and 64 percent in Ohio). Program participants were found to achieve such positive results as:

- In the final CUNY study, ASAP students received significantly more student supports than non-ASAP students.⁴ Through these services, advisors made sure students were not falling behind in classes. The combination of supports led to ASAP students persisting at higher rates, particularly during the periods between semesters, and ultimately gave rise to an 18-percentage point difference in three-year graduation rates (40 percent vs. 22 percent for a comparable population). ASAP students also enrolled in four-year colleges at a higher rate (25 percent) compared with the control group (17 percent). CUNY’s own evaluation of the program found similarly strong results: for instance, after six years, 63.6 percent of ASAP first-time students had completed an associates or bachelors program (or both) compared with 43.3 percent of students in the comparison group.⁵ Finally, although the college invested significant resources at the start of the project, those funds clearly paid off at the end with significantly higher completion rates. Under ASAP, the cost per graduate was 11.4 percent *lower* than if the institution had not provided the supports, because the added cost per participant was more than offset by the higher percentage of participants who ultimately graduated.
- The evaluation in Ohio is still ongoing, but preliminary results have found ASAP students were more likely to enroll full-time and maintain their full-time enrollment beyond the first semester when compared with control group (85 percent vs. 67 percent).⁶ They were also more likely to persist from one semester to the next (82 percent vs. 70 percent in the control group), and ultimately earned 28 percent more credits.

Supporting students with financial assistance

Although only a small number of students actually get some amount of tuition and fees waived due to the “last-dollar” nature of ASAP (since most students’ grants are sufficient to pay for their tuition and fees), it is helpful to reduce even some of the costs low-income students face. However, “first dollar” programs, where tuition and fees are waived and student aid is freed up for living costs, better address the depth of unmet financial need faced by low-income students.⁷

A Promise program in California that provides additional aid for non-tuition costs has significantly improved the ability of students of color—who are less likely to apply, persist, and complete a postsecondary education than White students—to earn a credential.⁸ Students of color are also more likely to have unmet financial need⁹ in college and to be student-parents,¹⁰ among their other responsibilities. This additional aid from the Promise program can provide an important lifeline.

But there are other benefits of the financial award provided by ASAP beyond the direct subsidy to students. One of these is a much higher rate for completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which has been shown to improve college persistence by 72 percent for all students, and 122 percent for Pell recipients. At CUNY, 88 percent of ASAP participants received a Pell Grant, which requires the completion of the FAFSA.¹¹ This FAFSA completion rate compares with the typical average of only about 50 percent for all students at public institutions. One study found the effects of need-based grants, which can only be obtained after completing a FAFSA, have a particularly high impact on low-income students, effectively closing the persistence gap between low- and higher-income students.¹²

Georgia State University provides “Keep HOPE Alive” grants, which offer support of \$500 a semester over two semesters.¹³ This grant goes to former Georgia HOPE Scholarship recipients who need support in regaining their academic eligibility for HOPE.¹⁴ These funds are given to students alongside academic advising. Although it offers a relatively small amount, this grant has doubled graduation rates among recipients. A car repair, an illness, or other kinds of expenses may not be large in comparison to the overall cost of attendance, but these expenses nonetheless can put a significant strain on students’ household budgets, creating a severe obstacle to staying in school.

ASAP addresses some of these lower-cost financial barriers by providing transportation and textbook assistance, as well as tuition and fee waivers when needed. The strength of ASAP goes well beyond its financial assistance, though. Since most students only receive transportation and book aid, the remarkable persistence and completion results of the ASAP initiatives have been achieved because of, not in spite of, the focus on these routine costs.

Benefits of focusing on student supports

The research base that proves the value of student services is limited but positive. In Texas, Project QUEST employs a similar model to ASAP: it covers tuition and other necessary costs while also providing counseling and post-completion job placement assistance. A recent randomized control trial study found participants had sustained earnings gains six years after the program, and these effects were greater for nontraditional students.¹⁵ Students in the project were also more consistently employed. CLASP’s Benefits Access for College Completion program, which connected community college students to public benefits programs, showed increases in the average number of terms enrolled by students, the average number of credits earned, and the percentage of students earning college credentials.¹⁶ Additionally, studies of a comprehensive K-12 strategy showed that providing tutoring, health care, and college preparation and other services improves student academic achievement and produces a return on investment.¹⁷ These supports are most important for low-income and at-risk students.

Remedial education is a significant concern in postsecondary education because about half of all college students will take at least one such course.¹⁸ Remedial education often becomes a time and financial trap for students, with incomplete remedial coursework blocking them from moving on to for-credit coursework. One analysis found that

only 16 percent of community college students who were referred to a remedial course eventually completed a college-level math course.¹⁹ The remedial education system is further broken because institutions often determine placement based solely on a test, which can be an inaccurate measure of a student's potential academic performance.²⁰

The block scheduling used by ASAP is set up for students to take remedial education and credit-bearing courses concurrently. Importantly, ASAP students also take these remedial (and other) courses as part of a cohort, so they have peer support in addition to the personalized tutoring that is a core part of the program. When they have to delay taking courses that count toward their program of study, some students feel trapped in remedial education and begin to doubt their ability to be successful in college. By taking both remedial and credit-bearing courses simultaneously and having a support network, students can see progress and gain confidence. An innovative version of this strategy is co-requisite education in which students take remedial and credit-bearing classes at the same time and in the same subject. Tennessee implemented this strategy statewide in its community colleges and saw a significant increase in students who were able to pass for-credit math and writing classes while co-requisitely taking a remedial class.²¹

ASAP's greatest increases in persistence and completion underscore the value of combining financial and non-financial resources, particularly for low-income students who have intertwined needs that can restrict their college success. CLASP has advocated over many years for connecting students to comprehensive financial supports, including public benefits programs and refundable tax credits.²² ASAP partners with Single Stop, which is present on all of CUNY's community college campuses, to make these connections. These supports can address many basic needs including health insurance, child care, housing, and even flexible additional dollars. Thirty percent of students earning \$20,000 or less indicate in their responses on the FAFSA that they receive public benefits. With the proliferation of food pantries²³ on campus and increasing awareness about student homelessness,²⁴ it is safe to assume many more students could benefit from public benefits. Connecting students to public benefits programs has the added bonus of potentially qualifying them for the FAFSA's simplified needs test, which would require them to complete a shorter FAFSA form, saving them time and guaranteeing they get the aid they deserve. Further, public benefits programs are particularly helpful to adults without a college degree on their path out of poverty.²⁵

Policy options

The success of ASAP initiatives in improving college affordability, persistence, and completion prospects for low-income students offers important insights for policymakers to consider in reforming the federal Higher Education Act (HEA). Funding for postsecondary student aid programs is based on inputs (enrollments), which incentivize institutions to admit students without an emphasis on subsequent student performance. Meanwhile, at both the federal and state levels, policy attention is increasingly focused on holding institutions accountable for negative outcomes (such as students failing to complete or their inability to repay student loans) through risk-sharing concepts. These mechanisms are flawed, in part, because data lags mean institutional rewards, and punishments are based on student outcomes from several years prior and not connected to the persistence, successes, or challenges of current students. Risk-sharing schemes also provide perverse incentives for institutions to focus on serving students who appear more likely to complete, leaving behind those who might be most likely to benefit from the added support.

Focusing on enrollments and outcomes—the beginning and endpoints of college—ignores the entire student academic experience as it happens. A strategy that emphasizes student supports elevates the importance of—and focuses resources on—the student experience. Through financial and non-financial means, ASAP initiatives invest in students from enrollment all the way through to completion or transfer. The ASAP model should be more widely adopted, which could be supported by its inclusion in a reauthorization of the HEA.

For many years the HEA has acknowledged the importance of student support services for low-income and first-generation students through the TRIO program. For instance, programs in Oregon,²⁶ Louisiana,²⁷ and Virginia,²⁸ among many others, provide vulnerable TRIO students with critical academic and financial support, along with transfer assistance and other need-based services. Because student support services are included in TRIO but no other programs, this critical strategy for postsecondary success should be expanded in the next HEA reauthorization.

Federal policy options could include:

- Authorize and fund a pilot program to expand ASAP to other sites and states. This is a low-risk proposition, because rigorous evaluations have already measured success in two demographically and geographically different areas, with no identified limitations on its effectiveness in wider use. This is evidence-based policymaking, an approach with wide bipartisan support. The pilot should require new ASAP initiatives to use a “first-dollar” structure—so that student aid can be used for other costs of education besides tuition, fees, books, and transportation—or to build in supplemental funds for other expenses like emergency car repairs, for instance.
- Authorize funding for the Student Success Grant Pilot program, HEA Title VIII (Section 820), which has been unfunded since 2008. This program, like ASAP, would award grants to institutions to serve first-year students in need of remedial education. The grants would pay for success coaches who work intensely with a small group of students, providing assistance in navigating college services, connecting them to community resources, and providing academic and career advising. Institutions may also use the grants for other student benefits such as learning communities, work-study jobs with private employers, and curriculum redesign (including for remedial education).
- The lessons of ASAP should inform any policy proposals to create a “free college” or Promise-style program. Policymakers should keep in mind the reality that the same students benefitting from reduced tuition will also need supports to persist and complete. Such new plans could provide additional financial support to the Student Support Services program in TRIO or the Student Success Grants mentioned above, or use other mechanisms to require institutions to provide counseling and advising as a condition of getting funds to offset tuition. ASAP can also complement existing state and local free college initiatives. When tuition is already subsidized through a free college program, the start-up costs for the other services of the ASAP initiative would be significantly lower, and institutions would have the potential for even greater savings on a per-graduate basis. Skyline Community College plans to attempt this with its soon-to-be operational ASAP program.²⁹

CLASP recommends that any policy change focusing on student supports should include comprehensive financial supports. In addition, each student should have an advisor who has specific knowledge of these programs to ensure the student’s comprehensive needs are being met. These services should consciously include part-time students, whether enrolled in ASAP or not. Although the ASAP initiatives are currently designed only for full-time

attendance, those who attend part-time are in particular need of counseling and other personalized assistance to help them navigate through college because they spend less time on campus. With a sufficient support system, some part-time students may be enabled to increase their enrollment to full-time.

Grants to students that cover tuition and fees can address some of students' unmet need. But much of that need is non-financial. Student supports, like counseling, tutoring, and modern remediation strategies, are also critical to support low-income students' success in college. ASAP offers a promising model of connecting these two halves to help the whole student.

Endnotes

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