Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success
Community of Practice Research and Equity Agenda

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. is in the midst of a college completion crisis. While high school graduation rates have risen for two decades to a record high of 86 percent,[1] college graduation rates have stagnated and rates for students of color have remained below even that stagnate rate.[2] The growing cost of college is one, albeit perhaps the most significant, barrier to completion students face. However, research shows that frequent, intensive advising combined with financial and other support can make a tremendous difference in helping students complete.[3]That is why two years ago, TICAS began working with a set of organizations across the country that are providing these comprehensive approaches to student success, or CASS.

These organizations, which include CUNY ASAP, InsideTrack, MAAPS, One Million Degrees, Project QUEST, Stay the Course, and Bottom Line all take a similar approach of connecting students with a counselor or case manager who meets frequently with them to build a personal relationship and connect them with a customized suite of support - academic, financial, and personal - to help them overcome barriers and attain a degree.[4]

All of these programs have been rigorously evaluated and found to measurably increase college persistence, completion, and/or student earnings upon graduation. CUNY ASAP, the most well-known of these initiatives, doubled college graduation rates among participants. For those students who started working with One Million Degrees in high school, graduation rates increased by 73 percent.[5] In the 11 years following their exit from ProjectQUEST, participants continue to earn more than individuals who did not participate, about $31,000 more.[6] Yet, despite the clear promise they show, these programs have struggled to secure reliable, sustained public investments that would make it possible for them to scale nationally and move the needle on college completion rates across the country.

TICAS convened these organizations quarterly, along with research partners MDRC and the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO), to better understand what it would take to reach all students who could benefit from these programs throughout the country. Through this "community of practice," TICAS also sought to provide a forum for leaders of these organizations to share learnings and challenges with one another to accelerate the growth of the field.

Initially, TICAS sought input from all members of the community of practice to craft a national policy proposal aimed at providing federal funds to states to make CASS programming more widely available.[7] President Biden and members of the U.S. Congress included components of this proposal in their plans to provide significant new investments in evidence-based college completion programs, $62 billion over 10 years in the American Families Plan and $9 billion over 7 years in the Build Back Better legislation.[8] The Build Back Better bill has passed the House of Representatives and is now being considered by the Senate. It may result in significant new resources for these evidence-based interventions. If so, policymakers and program and institutional leaders will immediately wrestle with critical questions about how to scale with fidelity, particularly in different geographic locations and institutional contexts, and strengthen the field's impact on equity. To crystalize the elements of those key questions the field needs to answer, TICAS engaged community of practice members in creating a research agenda and equity framework. This report summarizes those efforts, including the research questions the community of practice has surfaced as most pertinent to prioritize and a framework for equity in the use of data that each organization is interested in adopting.

RESEARCH AGENDA

Existing Studies

Multiple randomized controlled trials (RCT) show that CASS programs are effective at improving student outcomes, ranging from college persistence and credit accumulation to longer-term impacts on completion, transfer, and earnings. Indeed, evidence on CASS programs represents the strongest body of evidence about what works to improve postsecondary education. The findings from the RCTs of the programs involved in our community of practice provide a snapshot of the robustness of the CASS evidence base:

- **CUNY ASAP:** Through both longitudinal program data and external RCT evaluation, the graduation rate of ASAP participants, virtually all of whom are low-income students of color, has been shown to be nearly double that of their comparison group.[9] The evaluation also concluded that the intervention held promise for narrowing equity gaps. Additionally, the program saw similar gains in student completion rates at three community college replication sites in Ohio.[10] A study of ASAP's impact after six years found that program participants continued to graduate at higher rates than other students.

- **Project QUEST:** An external RCT evaluation with additional state administrative data found that QUEST participants earned over $4,600 more annually in the eleventh year after exiting the program and more than $31,000 over the entire 11-year follow-up period, compared to those in the control group. While previous studies on Project QUEST have shown gains in short-term earnings among participants, overwhelmingly students of color who are living in poverty, this long-term study result shows that the program has significant, positive impacts on participants' career development.[11]

- **One Million Degrees (OMD):** In an external RCT evaluation across eight community college campuses in Chicago, initial findings show that OMD's model increases associate's degree attainment by 19 percent for students who took up the offer to participate in the program and enrolled in college compared to the control group.[12] For students who begin with OMD in high school, the study found substantially larger impacts. Close to 95 percent of students served by OMD are non-white and almost 70 percent are eligible for Pell grants, positioning the program well to close equity gaps in college graduation rates.

- **InsideTrack:** An external RCT conducted using InsideTrack data from eight different postsecondary institutions in the 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 school years found that students who were coached in the first year of entering the program were about 15 percent more likely to persist in college after 18 and 24 months of receiving coaching.[13]

- **Stay the Course:** An RCT evaluation at a large community college in Texas found that Stay the Course increased associate's degree completion among enrolled women by 31.5 percentage points, which is nearly three times the graduation rate of women in the control group.[14] Among program participants, the average family income was just above $22,500, 90 percent lived at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty limit, and 66 percent were Black or Hispanic.

- **Bottom Line:** A large, multi-site RCT evaluation with administrative and survey data found Bottom Line's program model – intensive advising during high school and college – increased the likelihood of participants enrolling in four-year colleges by 13 percent. The study also found that participants were likelier to enroll in higher quality insti-

tutions compared to the control group. Bottom Line students were also 53 percent more likely to earn a bachelor's degree within six years after high school.[15] Students are eligible for Bottom Line if their families make less than 200 percent of the federal poverty limit.

- **Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS):** An external RCT study with an over 10,000-student sample from 11 institutions found that after four academic years, students at Georgia State University who were offered MAAPS advisement had a GPA that was 0.16 higher than the control group; student subgroups such as those who are Pell-eligible, first-generation, and underrepresented saw similar gains. Black students in the treatment group also had higher graduation and persistence rates that were eight and 12 percentage points higher than their counterparts in the control group, respectively.[16]

Expanding and replicating evidence-based models such as these will be critical to closing educational equity gaps nationwide. These programs all primarily serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, and they are designed to close equity gaps. National higher education researchers and experts suggest that offering students both academic and non-academic supports, such as proactive advising, career guidance, and financial aid, can help them navigate a variety of challenges that impede them from completing coursework and earning a postsecondary degree. Specifically, they point out – among other strategies for providing comprehensive student supports at the community college level – the importance of connecting with students one-on-one to assess their needs and challenges.[17]

Proposed Research Agenda

Although a few programs such as CUNY ASAP and InsideTrack have been able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their program at replication sites, the robustness of other replication efforts has yet to be determined.[18] Problems finding enough students at replication sites to take up the program, expansion sites that deviate from the core components of the program, and fickle funding streams have all created hurdles for organizations attempting to replicate and scale their original program with fidelity in other states and institutions. CUNY ASAP, which has been able to overcome these hurdles successfully for the most part, has done so by dedicating staff to providing technical assistance to its replication sites full-time and limiting the number of new institutions it will assist in any given year.

The promise these proven CASS programs have shown in increasing college completion, particularly for students that have traditionally been under-served, is simply too great not to have them operating successfully in more places across the country. To do so, however, policymakers and program leaders need to understand better how to replicate and scale without losing the components that have made them successful. Thus, more research is needed on how proven programs can successfully replicate their models in different contexts while maintaining the same degree of impact they experienced at their original location. Over the course of four half-day convenings, the programs in our community of practice discussed the need for further evidence on this issue as well as other areas where the evidence base is lighter. They concluded that the two highest priority areas of needed research are (1) replication with fidelity and (2) long-term impacts.

To differing degrees, the programs within the community of practice all are wrestling with questions about how to expand effectively while adhering to the core components of their model and adjusting and adapting other elements to provide the greatest benefit to students. Centrally, program leads are wondering what outcomes and other data elements to measure to track program quality as they expand.

The second major bucket of research program leads coalesced around during community of practice meetings was measuring the long-term impact of program participation on students' economic mobility. The community of practice members have varying degrees of evidence about the impact of their programs on short-term metrics like persistence, completion and even initial student earnings, but they lack long-term evidence of the implications of participating in their program for students' economic mobility. (Project Quest is the one exception, with documented causal impact on long-term earnings.) Partly programs lack long-term impact data because they have not been operating long enough to have developed that kind of evidence. But data limitations also contribute to the problem. Although most states have a longitudinal data system, few link their postsecondary education system with their wage data (generally through their unemployment insurance system) consistently. And, because CASS programs are external nonprofit providers and not state-run higher education institutions (except for CUNY ASAP) the difficulty obtaining data about their students' post-college lives currently is very difficult. But, as with the replication research, for students to benefit fully from these programs more needs to be known about their impact on long-term economic mobility.

Drawing from these two areas of research interest, community of practice leads articulated these two specific research questions and sub-questions:

RESEARCH QUESTION #1

How can policymakers, program and institutional leaders ensure fidelity when programs scale up within institutions, across states, and across the nation?

- How have program modifications affected student success outcomes, such as persistence and completion?

- What types of evidence might program and institutional leaders rely on to measure these modifications and their impacts? Is there a way to use qualitative data?

- What are the best practices shared across all CASS programs (or that could be shared) on modifying with fidelity as a program expands?

- Are there tools that could be created, for instance, such as benchmarking templates or data reporting requirements, to better track quality while scaling?

- How should programs measure fidelity when some parts of programs are replicated identically to the existing program and other parts are modified?

- How should program leaders and researchers weigh various components and modifications to determine the level of fidelity?

- How can stakeholders determine whether a variation is significant enough to merit additional rigorous evaluation to ensure positive impacts?

- What are the implications and considerations for replication with fidelity based on this evidence?

- Are there program elements that are more or less critical to maintain fidelity?

- What do these answers suggest about the cost of replication?

Do these programs result in increases in students' earnings, income, wealth, and well-being over the long-term? Do these programs enable students to achieve family-sustaining jobs throughout their lives?

- What metrics should students use to track students beyond graduation (ideally, 3- or 4-year outcomes or longer)? Are there outcomes beyond persistence, credit accumulation, receipt of a degree or certificate, and earnings upon graduation?

- Is it possible to collect and disaggregate data by demographic groups beyond graduation? What are the barriers to such an approach and how could they be overcome?

- Could researchers and program leads extend their follow-up research and data collection periods to include transfer rates, bachelor's graduation rates, and earnings, occupation or employment information at the 6- to 8-year mark?

- Could states facilitate these data collection approaches?

- Could programs define a common set of outcomes, such as persistence, transfer, receipt of a 4-year degree, including disaggregation by student subgroup, that all programs, institutions and states collect and report?

- Is there a way to look at the impact of these programs over an even longer timeframe?

Proposed Equity Framework

In addition to the above research questions, the community of practice coalesced around a shared equity framework, which will serve two purposes. First, this framework allows programs to measure and begin to close internal equity gaps. Second, the framework provides a uniform set of metrics to help programs describe their impact to external audiences.

A commitment to equity is critical to ensuring that underserved students benefit from these services. If programs take a passive approach to enrolling students, they could end up serving students who are more motivated to succeed than others, or who share characteristics that make them more likely to persist in and graduate from college, regardless of whether they participate in a CASS program. While the evaluations did not find substantial demographic differences between the treatment and control groups, program leads are motivated to closely and regularly monitor data about program participants to ensure that they are using their limited resources to serve students who are low-income, BIPOC, and otherwise have traditionally been underserved by educational systems. Without a commitment to equity, these programs could exacerbate racial gaps in college completion.

The foundation of the shared equity framework for CASS programs is disaggregated student participant and outcome data collected at the same times throughout students' educational journey. Specifically, programs plan to collect demographic data at entry, compare the population of participants to the institutional demographics and work to ensure the program is reaching all students, including the hardest to reach students. At minimum, programs will work to serve more Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color as well as first generation students than the student population writ large.

Programs in the community of practice operate in different contexts. Project QUEST, for example, serves mostly Latinx students while One Million Degrees and CUNY ASAP serve more Black students. All three programs, however, serve a large population of first-generation students. While the demographic profiles of the programs, and the institutions and states in which they operate vary, the programs are committed to defining a common set of demographics of interest and measuring outcomes for each group to ensure the programs are promoting equity internally and narrowing equity gaps across their institutions.

Some of the key variables included in the equity framework are:

BASELINE VARIABLES		OUTCOME VARIABLES	
Demographics	Age	Registration	Enrolled at 2-year
	Gender		Enrolled at 4-year
	Race/Ethnicity	Credits Attempted	Total credits attempted
Children	Has children		Full or part time load
	Age of youngest child	Credits Attained	Total credits earned
Employment	Currently employed		College credits earned
	Average weekly hours	Credentials Attained	Attained a certificate
	Plan to work during the semester		Attained an associate's degree
Financial Aid	Pell recipient		Attained a bachelor's degree
	Expected Family Contribution		Attained a graduate degree

Program leads are committed to using this data to improve their practices, including how they structure their programs and what kinds of supports they provide to students, and the practices of the institutions within which they work to advance equity. Fundamentally, the programs want to drive systematic changes in how their institutions serve first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds to college completion. They raised the following specific questions in considering which data to collect and how to think about using it in their practices:

- Why are we collecting this data and how will we use them to change programmatic and institutional practices to better support students of color, first generation students and students from low-income backgrounds?

- How do we collect data while respecting the dignity of students to only share what programs need to support them and understand program impacts?

- How do we measure equity gaps (one static goal/benchmark, reduction in the gap)?

- How do we define subgroups of students, including accounting for some intersectionality?

- What effects are community of practice programs having on broader equity gaps within their institutions?

- What are the equity gaps within community of practice programs?
- Are there models or examples of robust equity frameworks we could draw from? Catholic Charities of Fort Worth, for example, has a set of guiding principles aligned to their data equity framework that helps program leaders prioritize inclusivity and equitable data collection when considering what data they need to collect to suit their needs.

Where do we go from here?

Over the course of the next two years, TICAS will work with our research partners, MDRC and LEO, to begin answering these questions and to share the findings with federal and state policymakers and the student success field. The community of practice will begin implementing the shared equity framework this year. We invite other programs to establish their own equity frameworks, borrowing from ours as a basis. We also invite other researchers to work with us to answer these questions and help contribute to the body of knowledge that is leading the way for helping underserved students' complete college and advance equity in postsecondary attainment.

ENDNOTES

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