



From the City to the Country: How a Community College in West Virginia Adapted CUNY's ASAP for Rural Success



Community colleges are the **backbone of the American higher-education system**. They are economic engines providing skilled workers for local industries. They offer affordable and accessible education to millions, equipping students with the skills needed to succeed in the workforce while also offering a stepping stone to a bachelor's degree for many.

Yet, community colleges continue to underperform. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the graduation rate at two-year postsecondary institutions is just **31.2 percent**. Prior to 2007, the situation in the City University of New York's (CUNY) community college system was even more concerning. The three-year graduation rate for the community colleges in the CUNY system was around 13 percent, which was lower than the average for other urban community colleges.

In response, CUNY designed the **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)**, a postsecondary student intervention initiative, to give their cohorts a better chance for success. ASAP provides students with financial benefits, direct support services, and an educational structure to help keep students on the path to graduation. The program has served over 100,000 students so far.

Students participating in CUNY ASAP graduated at a rate of 40.1%.

Source: MDRC, February 2015

Graduation rate at two-year postsecondary institutions is 31.2%

Source: Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019

A **study by MDRC**, a nonprofit education- and social-policy research group, confirmed that ASAP was directly responsible for improved academic performance among students. The study found that students at CUNY who are involved in the Accelerated Study program graduate at a rate of 40.1 percent. The graduation rate of their non-ASAP counterparts was barely half that, at

21.8 percent. They also found that the program reduced the cost-per-degree for the college, despite a higher initial investment, and returned to the taxpayer [three dollars for every one dollar invested](#).

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After achieving success throughout CUNY’s community colleges, the model attracted attention from other higher-education institutions around the country. Since then, the model has provided a blueprint for postsecondary success through the [ASAPACE National Replication Collaborative](#) — a network of institutions and organizations working together to adapt and implement the ASAP program in their respective regions. Currently, community colleges across seven states have replicated the model under very different circumstances — including at West Virginia University (WVU) at Parkersburg, a community college that serves a rural population.

TAKING THE ASAP MODEL TO RURAL WEST VIRGINIA

West Virginia at Parkersburg is a small, rural campus and the only community college in the state of West Virginia that offers bachelor’s degrees. WVU Parkersburg’s cohort is 98 percent rural, 70 percent first-generation, and approximately 60 percent Pell-eligible.

“The question was: How do we take the ASAP program from New York City, and apply it to an industrial, on-the-river, very rural context?” says Jennifer Forster, WVU Parkersburg’s director of Ascend.

ASCEND REPRODUCES THE ASAP SUCCESS FORMULA

“Ascend” stands for [Accelerating Student Completion: Encouraging New Dreams](#) and is the name given to WVU Parkersburg’s ASAP replication effort.

Students enrolled in the Ascend program are first brought into a one-day summer institute that serves as an additional orientation session to help with community building. They are assigned an academic advisor with whom they meet regularly. The advisor is responsible for monitoring each student’s progress and identifying their risk levels and how much support each student needs, rated high, medium, or low.

A struggling student receives a higher level of support, meeting with their advisor three times a month. Medium-level students meet their advisors once a month, and students needing low support meet with their advisor just twice a semester.

Advisors assign support levels based on a lot more than grade average. Forster offered instances where a student could be provided a higher level of support based on their circumstances. “A student could have a 4.0 average but live in their car. This student might be assigned a high level of support because they’re at a higher risk of dropping out due to life circumstances,” says Forster.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES DESIGNED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF RURAL STUDENTS

Through a partnership with [West Virginia Invest](#), most students at WVU Parkersburg automatically qualify for free tuition. Ascend students get additional financial incentives, such as receiving up to \$200 for textbooks.

For many [rural students](#), commuting to class can oftentimes become a primary hurdle to their success. To that end, each student in Ascend is also given a \$50 voucher every month that they can use towards gas or groceries. Students are required to attend on-campus tutoring and to complete one career development exercise every semester in order to maintain this financial support — further incentivizing students in the program to work towards their academic goals.



Students have three years to complete their studies. After three years, they lose financial support but will retain advisory and academic support. “The biggest success from Ascend was from those advising relationships. And bringing relationship development into our wider advisory roles is low-hanging fruit. It’s the thing that we can make happen fairly easily and with broad strokes across the institution,” says Forster.

CUNY PARTNERSHIP WAS ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESSFUL REPLICATION

WVU Parkersburg began planning its ASAP replication efforts in 2019. They piloted Ascend with 60 students in 2020, and then launched the full program with three cohorts in 2021, 2022, and 2023. “We needed that first year to figure out our methods of documentation, managing student data, and making any necessary corrections,” says Forster.

An integral part of the replication was the collaboration between WVU Parkersburg and CUNY. The two universities maintained regular contact at the beginning of the program. CUNY helped the WVU Parkersburg team develop the program, set up any data tracking, and ensure that the ASAP model was being followed as closely as possible.

Throughout, Forster and her team met with their CUNY counterparts regularly. “They provided me with all kinds of resources to help develop our policies and some of our marketing materials. These are the kinds of things that you need when you’re starting to develop a program.”

They are part of a community of practice, where Ascend advisors from WVU Parkersburg attend monthly meetings with the CUNY team and

2020

WVU Parkersburg begins planning ASAP replication effort

2021

The college pilots Ascend with 60 students

2021-2023

Additional student cohorts participating in Ascend are launched annually

other National Replication Collaborative Partners to discuss best practices and offer each other support.

Like all replication participants, members of the WVU Parkersburg team also attend virtual replication conferences to share and learn from best practices.

ASSESSING STUDENT SUCCESS WITH ASCEND

Ascend's first cohort from 2021 is nearing completion of the program. To assess the successes of WVU Parkersburg's replication effort and how it compares to the original ASAP program, philanthropic organization Arnold Ventures is funding a multi-year, randomized control trial study. Evaluation of their results is underway and will also be carried out for the remaining two cohorts.

For the multi-year study, 60 percent of eligible students were placed in the Ascend program, while the remaining comprised the control group. The results of this study will produce causal estimates of the effects of the ASAP model in rural West Virginia.

Aside from graduation rates, the study also aims to understand the effects on student employment outcomes in West Virginia. It will look at placement and earnings rates of Ascend students in major employment sectors in the state, such as industrial maintenance, criminal justice, and computer science.

The results of the Ascend study won't be published until all cohorts complete their programs but Forster believes that the early signs are promising, "We are a long way off from our published results, but it's trending pretty positive for completion rates."

After the multi-year study wraps up, West Virginia at Parkersburg is looking to replicate as much of the Ascend Program as possible across the entire institution, particularly the advisement model.

The financial incentives might be harder to offer, but the university will seek further support

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from grants to make this possible. The college is also finding ways to reduce the amount of money students need for textbooks, and they will continue collaborating with West Virginia Invest for tuition waivers.

THE NATION-WIDE SCOPE OF THE ASAP REPLICATION EFFORTS

For seven years, the successes of ASAP were limited to CUNY colleges across New York City. "When we began the replication work, it was a lot about understanding the effects of ASAP outside of the New York City environment," says Christine Brongniart, university executive director for CUNY's ASAP and ACE (Accelerate, Complete, Engage) programs. "I think the real test then was to see if those impacts would translate to different demographic and geographic contexts."

The [ASAP replication](#) efforts began in 2014. CUNY collaborated with MDRC and the Ohio Department of Higher Education. ASAP supported three Ohio-based community colleges in replicating the ASAP model. After three years, [MDRC released its findings](#), which confirmed that programs like ASAP almost doubled three-year graduation rates as well as increased the number of students who transferred to four-year colleges. After six years, the Ohio programs increased annual earnings by \$1,948.

“ The doors of conversation and engagement are open to all community colleges across the country. We’re ready to take ASAP to the next level,” says Rodríguez, CUNY’s chancellor.

Part of the replication efforts included establishing the [ASAP|ACE National Replication Collaborative](#). Being part of this collaborative gives institutions access to customized technical assistance in replicating ASAP. The community makes it easy for all participants to share their experiences of implementing the program and learn from each other.

So far, the CUNY ASAP Replication program has reached colleges across [39 replication sites](#) in seven states — Ohio, New York, California, Tennessee, West Virginia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania.

“The doors of conversation and engagement are open to all community colleges across the country. We’re ready to take ASAP to the next level,” says Rodríguez, CUNY’s chancellor. Even within CUNY, the university is looking at all student success programs to see what elements of ASAP can be injected into them to make them more effective.

There are also ongoing efforts to see how the ASAP program can serve part-time community college students at replication sites in California and Ohio. “This is our space of innovation. Of bringing the very best ideas in the models of student success, to serve the students that have been traditionally more marginalized in higher education,” says Rodríguez.



Arnold Ventures is a philanthropy that supports research to understand the root causes of America’s most persistent and pressing problems, as well as evidence-based solutions to address them. By focusing on systemic change, AV is working to improve the lives of American families, strengthen their communities, and promote their economic opportunity. Since Laura and John Arnold launched their foundation in 2008, the philanthropy has expanded, and Arnold Ventures’ focus areas include education, criminal justice, health, infrastructure, and public finance, advocating for bipartisan policy reforms that will lead to lasting, scalable change. As signatories of the Giving Pledge, the Arnolds have committed to giving away most of their wealth during their lives.