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COMMUNITY COLLEGES LOOK TO REPLICATE CUNY'S ACCELERATED STRATEGY

Schools in Ohio and California, among others, aim to boost graduation rates with support programs

By Melissa Korn
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The City University of New York figured out how to double its community-college graduation rate for some students. Now it is sharing the secret sauce with schools in Ohio, California and elsewhere.

Skyline College in San Bruno, Calif., and Westchester Community College in New York will pilot versions of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, this fall, while Ohio's governor is angling for funding to expand that state's replication project to nine institutions from its current three sites.

Nearly six in 10 students who started at CUNY two-year schools between 2007 and 2013 and participated in ASAP graduated within three years – often while working and caring for families. Those who didn't participate, but had similar backgrounds, had just a 28 percent likelihood of completing their degrees in that time frame.

CUNY administrators peg the success at campuses including LaGuardia Community College and Borough of Manhattan Community College in large part to "intrusive advising," or hyperinvolved staffers who help students enroll in the right courses and stay on track. Relieving students of extra costs for transit and books is also crucial, they say.

The adoption of CUNY's model comes as community colleges try to boost often abysmal graduation rates, while out-of-pocket costs for students increase and enrollments sink. School officials say getting better is a necessity, otherwise states could pull funding and students will look elsewhere for a decent return on their investment. Nationally, 39 percent of first-time students at community colleges got a credential from a two- or four-year school within six years; poor students fared even worse.

"They're hemorrhaging students every single step of the way," said Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center, at Columbia University's Teachers College. While community colleges have delivered on their mission to offer low-cost access to education, he said, they often fail to get students to the finish line.

Since launching nearly a decade ago at its six community colleges in the sprawling City University of New York system, ASAP now enrolls 15,000 students across nine campuses. Participants must take at least 12 credits each in fall and spring, and often winter and summer classes as well, sign up for remedial courses and tutoring when necessary and participate in career development programs and monthly academic advising sessions. In exchange, they get tuition waivers, free subway passes, textbooks and help with course enrollment to keep them on track. Full-time tuition at CUNY's community colleges is \$4,800 a year for in-state students, and books and transit are estimated to cost another \$2,400.

Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana has been trying its own version of ASAP – which there stands for Associate Accelerated Program – on a small scale since 2010 as well, with strong success.

Mr. Jenkins said it could be difficult for many schools to replicate the model because the comprehensive advising system – with one adviser for every 150 students, in most cases – can be prohibitively expensive. CUNY spends about \$3,700 extra for each student in the program, paid for by foundation grants and the city and state. But he supports efforts to address pain points like confusing course registration and burdensome costs for books and other extras.

Beginning next fall, 300 Skyline College students will participate in a modified version of ASAP, including both the enrollment and advising obligations and financial incentives. The California school estimates the three-year program will cost \$2.9 million, plus startup expenses, with funding from sources including charities and the state community college system.

“It was a moral and professional imperative to do this,” said Regina Stanback Stroud, Skyline’s president. She said the school’s motto, “Skyline Shines,” didn’t seem apt when 40 percent of new students leave by spring semester and only about half of first-time students make it to graduation within three years.

More schools are reaching out to CUNY after seeing the success that three Ohio colleges had in replicating ASAP, even with older students who had families and worked full time.

Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Cuyahoga Community College and Lorain County Community College adopted ASAP in a spring 2015 pilot. Rather than a fare card for public transit, participants received a \$50 monthly gas and grocery card. They also don’t have access to year-round courses like CUNY offers. Otherwise, school and state officials say, the programs are nearly identical.

Convincing adults with families and jobs to enroll in 12 or 15 credits per term and sustain momentum has been a challenge, said Brett Visger, associate vice chancellor of institutional collaboration and completion at the Ohio Board of Regents. But it is paying off.

The 200-plus students in Cuyahoga’s version of ASAP have higher grade point averages than the general student population – 2.8, compared with 2.39 – and 69 percent returned for a second year of study, compared with 47 percent for all students.

Cuyahoga student Monolitta Carrington said her grades are now high enough that she will qualify for scholarships when she pursues a four-year nursing degree.

Signing up for the intense program was “one of the best decisions that I’ve made, as far as my college career,” said the 20-year-old. She said the personal support during final exams, or when she is concerned about a particular course, has helped boost her confidence to persist.

J. Michael Thomson, president of Cuyahoga’s eastern campus, said it would be tough to hire enough advisers to maintain personal relationships with thousands, rather than hundreds, of students. But the state’s performance-based funding model, which ties money to metrics like retention and graduation, could make the investment worthwhile.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, a Republican, has recommended earmarking \$10 million in the next biennial state budget to support the program at six more locations.

CUNY doesn't expect to package and sell its ASAP program widely, but rather will offer partners technical assistance, guidance on creating course sequences for students and training for academic advisers.

Christine Brongniart, director for new college partnerships for the ASAP program at CUNY, said that just as students require significant hand-holding for success, so too do the schools.