Scaling Success
Lessons From the ASAP Expansion at Bronx Community College

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In response to persistently low degree completion rates,
the City University of New York (CUNY), with funding from the Office of the Mayor's Center for Economic Opportunity, implemented the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at six community colleges in 2007.[1] At the time, less than 4 percent of CUNY community college students completed an associate degree within two years, and only 13 percent did so within three years (Strumbos, Kolenovic, & Tavares, 2016). ASAP was designed to improve completion rates by providing wraparound services for eligible students, including financial, academic, and personal support.

ASAP students are required to attend college full-time (taking at least 12 credits per semester), meet regularly with an advisor, and enroll immediately and continuously in any required developmental courses.[2] They are encouraged to take classes in the winter and summer when possible. In turn, they receive advising from an ASAP-dedicated advisor with a relatively small caseload, along with dedicated career and tutoring services. ASAP students take block-scheduled courses in their first year and may register for courses early to secure the ones they need for their majors. They also receive financial supports, such as tuition waivers that cover gaps between financial aid and college tuition, free MetroCards for the New York City public transportation system, and textbook assistance.

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Several studies have demonstrated that ASAP can dramatically improve student outcomes. CUNY researchers found that ASAP students earn an associate degree within three years at roughly double the rate of similar non-ASAP CUNY students (52.4 percent versus 26.9 percent) (Strumbos, Linderman, & Hicks, 2018). A random assignment study showed that ASAP students referred to developmental education are more likely to graduate than other CUNY students referred to developmental education (Scrivener et al., 2015). ASAP has also been found to be cost-effective for the university: The cost per degree is lower for ASAP students than for those receiving the standard college services (Levin & Garcia, 2013, 2018; Scrivener et al., 2015). An experimental study of ASAP implementation at three community colleges in Ohio similarly found positive results (Sommo, Cullinan, & Manno, 2018).

In light of this evidence, CUNY has received funding from the New York City Mayor's Office to expand ASAP across nine of its colleges, increasing program enrollment from 4,300 in 2014–15 to over 25,000 in 2018–19 (City University of New York, Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, 2018). As part of this effort, CUNY sought to expand ASAP enrollment at Bronx Community College (BCC) to 5,000 students— roughly 50 percent of its associate degree–seeking population—by 2019.

This program expansion effort creates an opportunity for the field to learn from BCC's experience. As colleges seek to transform their institutions and improve student outcomes, ASAP is frequently heralded as a viable solution (McMann, 2016)—but there are barriers to its adoption. Though cost-effective (Scrivener et al., 2015), the program requires additional resources to operate: Providing ASAP services costs CUNY roughly $3,500 more per student annually (or 35 percent more than the average full-time community college student) than providing standard services.[3] Additionally, research remains limited on the implementation and outcomes of comprehensive programs such as ASAP when they are scaled up to serve all who can benefit within individual colleges (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

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For this reason, the Community College Research Center (CCRC), in partnership with BCC and the ASAP team at CUNY's Office of Academic Affairs (CUNY OAA), is documenting the scale-up and examining how ASAP's expansion and principles can be harnessed to drive broad institutional improvement. In the current brief, the first from this multiyear project, we examine the expansion of ASAP and how the program was adapted in the process, using BCC as an illustrative case study. In doing so, we provide an in-process look at the early stages of program expansion, an often-overlooked part of institutional reform.

Our data come from interviews with key ASAP personnel, BCC administrators, enrollment management staff, and advisors; focus groups with faculty and students; and planning documents for the expansion. In our analysis, we draw from research on scaling reforms, much of which points to the multiplicity of challenges associated with scaling and the need for planned and unplanned adaptations (e.g., Balu, 2017; Chambers & Norton, 2015; Datnow, 2003; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Edgecombe, Cormier, Bickerstaff, & Barragan, 2013; Hulleman & Cordray, 2009). We identified three implementation priorities underlying the expansion of ASAP for which certain adaptations of the program were necessary:

- meeting enrollment targets;
- maintaining the student–advisor relationship component of ASAP; and
- staffing the program at scale.

In accordance with these priorities, adjustments were made to student recruitment and registration processes, the advising model and advisor training, and program staffing structures. These adaptations had repercussions for the ASAP scale-up and for BCC more broadly.

Expanding ASAP Across CUNY

CUNY OAA piloted ASAP in 2007, serving 1,132 students in the initial cohort. Based on results from early cohorts, funding from the city was increased to enable ASAP to serve more students. In the first wave of program expansion (2012–2014), in which CUNY sought to increase ASAP enrollments to 4,000, the advising model was adapted to enable advisors to serve larger caseloads while maintaining advising quality. In the second wave (2015–2019), in which CUNY aimed to increase ASAP enrollments to 25,000, changes were made to program recruitment to reach larger numbers of students earlier, new staff roles were added, and additional adjustments were made to further integrate ASAP into each college offering it. The key changes made to ASAP during these periods are summarized in Table 1. These changes served as guideposts for individual CUNY colleges as they worked to expand ASAP.

Table 1.

Changes to ASAP at CUNY During Two Waves of Expansion

First Wave (2012–2014)	Second Wave (2015–2019)
Planning and Goals	
• Planning year: 2011 • Increase enrollment from 1,286 to 4,000 by 2014–15 • Increase number of colleges to seven (adding one college in fall 2014)	• Planning year: 2014 • Increase enrollment from 4,325 to 25,000 by 2018–19 • Increase number of colleges to nine (adding two colleges in fall 2015)
Advising	
• Introduce needs-based advising model and begin to increase caseloads	• Implement needs-based advising model at scale and reach 150-student caseload for most advisors • Provide centrally run training and professional development and create advisor handbook
Recruitment and Enrollment	
• Increase citywide outreach and partnership building	• Continue to increase citywide outreach, including via subway and newspaper ads • Develop algorithm to identify potentially eligible students and incorporate it into ASAP admissions communications and processes
Database	
• Move ASAP database to a centralized web-based system	• Integrate ASAP database with CUNY data systems to reduce data entry and provide actionable, real-time data
Staffing	
• Add staff roles, such as program coordinators and a recruitment coordinator • Restructure student leader program to focus on recruitment and outreach	• Add additional staff roles, including an associate director • Pilot peer mentor program
Eligibility Criteria	
• Accept students from additional majors • Shift from basing program eligibility on a specific income threshold to basing eligibility on any receipt of need-based financial aid	• Accept students from nearly all majors • Eliminate program eligibility requirements based on income and financial aid receipt
Delivery of Program Resources	
	• Change MetroCard from monthly to semesterly

Expanding ASAP at Bronx Community College

BCC serves a critical student demographic. Ninety percent of its students are Black or Hispanic, and nearly 80 percent receive Pell grants. Nearly three quarters reside in the Bronx, which despite recent job growth continues to have high rates of unemployment and poverty, a low average household income, and a high proportion of residents without a college education. Scaling ASAP at BCC therefore has the potential to improve educational and labor market outcomes among students from demographic groups that are underserved by higher education—also benefiting their families and communities. The subset of BCC students in ASAP is generally representative of this diverse population, with a few distinct contrasts in gender distribution, developmental education referrals, and GED status, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
BCC Student Demographics

	ASAP Students, Fall 2007–Fall 2014	All Students, Fall 2014
n	949	11,506
Gender		
Male	36.1%	43.7%
Female	63.9%	56.3%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Native Alaskan	0.1%	0.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.7%	3.4%
Black	32.7%	32.4%
Hispanic	61.9%	61.0%
White	2.5%	3.0%
Mean age	22	24
Developmental education referral	78.2%	89.5%
GED recipient	15.0%	9.4%

Note: Table adapted from Bronx Community College (n.d.-a).

ASAP was first offered at BCC in fall 2007, enrolling 118 students. When CUNY OAA began its second wave of program expansion, BCC was selected for an even more ambitious project—to redesign its structures and policies to become an "ASAP college." With its high-quality ASAP program management, supportive college leadership, and strong ASAP graduation rates (see sidebar), BCC was identified as an ideal institution to engage in a broader redesign alongside its expansion of ASAP. CUNY OAA aimed to have nearly 5,000 BCC students enrolled in ASAP by 2018–19 and to serve all eligible incoming freshmen through ASAP by 2019. Table 3 illustrates the program's target enrollments over time.

THREE-YEAR GRADUATION RATES AT BCC

All Students

ASAP	Non-ASAP
53.9%	**17.7%**

Students With Developmental Needs

ASAP	Non-ASAP
54.5%	**18.8%**

Source: Bronx Community College (n.d.-a)

Table 3.

ASAP Enrollment Targets at BCC

Expansion Year	Number of Students	% of Associate Degree Seekers at BCC
Year 1	750–1,900	20
Year 2	1,900–3,500	35
Year 3	3,500–4,500	50

The scale-up involved a joint effort by BCC and CUNY OAA to manage planning, operations, marketing, communication, and evaluation. To facilitate this work, BCC and CUNY OAA staff formed a steering committee composed of key administrators, faculty, and staff to establish priorities and work plans for the program expansion.[4] From fall 2015 through spring 2016, the steering committee established the infrastructure to enroll 1,972 BCC students in ASAP in 2016–17 and assessed practices, policies, and processes across departments for barriers to program enrollment. The committee convened college leaders, faculty, and staff to identify systems and processes that would have to be established and engaged representatives from affected college functions in planning.

Based on these discussions, from fall 2016 through spring 2018, college-wide services and protocols were redesigned to help meet ASAP enrollment targets and improve outcomes for all BCC students (Bronx Community College, n.d.-a). Priorities for BCC's scaling effort were informed by CUNY's broader efforts to expand ASAP.

Expansion Priorities

Meeting Enrollment Targets

Expanding ASAP required new mechanisms for identifying eligible students and recruiting and enrolling them in the program. Before the expansion, ASAP personnel would identify eligible students after they were admitted to the college and invite them to ASAP information sessions, which were conducted separately from new student orientation and registration events. While ASAP staff successfully recruited students under this system, they and others at CUNY recognized that this approach would not be able to support the program's expansion. Interviewees also noted that conducting ASAP recruitment and registration outside the college's admissions office sometimes resulted in duplicative messaging to new students, adding unnecessary complexity to the enrollment process.

To address these challenges, CUNY OAA held a series of meetings with the central admissions and enrollment management offices and admissions staff from all nine CUNY colleges offering ASAP to develop ways to integrate ASAP into university admissions. Together with the University Application Processing Center in fall 2015, CUNY OAA developed an algorithm to gauge CUNY applicants' ASAP eligibility. Applicants identified as likely eligible were flagged so that a message about ASAP could be included in their acceptance emails. CUNY OAA staff provided suggested

language for this message indicating that the applicant was a "strong candidate for ASAP," along with a student-friendly video introduction to ASAP. The goal was for colleges to provide a timely, targeted message to students about their ASAP eligibility and the process for obtaining a spot in the program. The suggested language was welcoming and aimed to reduce the impression that applying to ASAP would be a burdensome process.

At BCC, the steering committee further aligned ASAP recruitment and enrollment with college admissions at the onset of the program's expansion. BCC's admissions staff took on ASAP recruitment and communications with potential ASAP students. Once accepted to BCC, those students were invited to a new student registration event where they were directed to an ASAP information session. There, they received an overview of the program and were able to enroll in ASAP and register for classes.[5] Streamlining and automating recruitment and enrollment in this way helped BCC meet its ASAP enrollment goals.

Changes to ASAP recruitment and enrollment offer insights into how working to expand a program can connect typically siloed college departments. BCC ASAP staff, like ASAP staff at other CUNY colleges, had previously managed student recruitment and registration largely independently. Their collaboration with BCC's admissions office fostered co-ownership of the expansion and integrated ASAP more fully into the college's functions, increasing the likelihood that the goals of the scale-up would "spread" to other areas of the college (Coburn, 2003). Some of our interviewees noted that other student success initiatives at CUNY could benefit from similar attention.

> **Working to expand a program can connect typically siloed college departments.**

Maintaining the Student–Advisor Relationship Component of ASAP

A hallmark of ASAP is its close student–advisor relationships. ASAP students work with the same advisor throughout their time at college, and they are required to meet regularly with their advisor to discuss their academic progress and personal development goals. This sustained advising relationship helps students feel comfortable openly discussing challenges with their advisor, which allows advisors to ensure that students receive the supports they need. Research has found that ASAP students receive more intensive student services than other CUNY students (Scrivener et al., 2015) and that ASAP advising is associated with a sizeable increase in two-year graduation rates (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013).

A 150:1 student–advisor ratio enables ASAP advisors to give students more individualized attention than is typical at community colleges, where this ratio can be as large as 750:1. When ASAP was launched, student–advisor ratios were even lower, with 60–70 students per advisor, but program leaders determined that to expand the program, they would need to increase advisors' caseloads. To do this while maintaining advising quality, they introduced a needs-based advising model in 2012 (as described in Boykin & Prince, 2015).

ASAP advisors review their caseload each semester and determine students' level of need based on their academic progress, personal circumstances, and program

participation factors. Students' level of need then determines the amount and type of advisor contact required. A high-need student may be required to meet with an advisor once per month individually and once in a group setting, whereas a medium-need student may be required to meet with an advisor once per month in a group setting and once by phone. All first-semester students are considered high-need and required to have at least two contacts per month with their advisor. While the minimum number of contacts for ASAP students at each need level is standard across CUNY, colleges have flexibility in the criteria they use to determine need and may establish additional contact requirements above the minimums.

During each wave of CUNY's ASAP expansion, CUNY OAA budgeted and planned for an increase in advising staff at all colleges to preserve the maximum caseload of 150 students per advisor. In the second wave of expansion, CUNY OAA also made changes to training and professional development for ASAP advisors to provide standardization and facilitate the onboarding of many new advisors at once. In addition to the training and coaching provided by each college, ASAP advisors received training and materials from the central office.

BCC made expedited hiring and onboarding of advisors a goal for its ASAP expansion, hiring six new advisors in fall 2016 and 14 the following year. However, both ASAP and non-ASAP stakeholders reported that BCC's processes for hiring advisors were too lengthy to accommodate the rapid increase in advisors needed for ASAP. As a result, some hires were delayed well into the fall 2017 semester, preventing the program from maintaining a 150:1 student–advisor ratio for several months. The enrollment target for fall 2017 was approximately 2,725 students, but the program had only 12 advisors as of that summer, leading some advisors to suggest ASAP was "accepting students faster than we are hiring advisors." Program staff had not previously encountered this issue with BCC's hiring practices, since prior to the expansion, the advising staff was small and hiring limited.

Compounding the prolonged hiring process was the training required for ASAP advisors. A BCC ASAP administrator observed that advisors can require up to a year of training to learn the model and adapt to the demands of the work. More generally, interviewees noted that although campus-based advisor training is important to ensuring advisors are prepared for their role, they questioned how to maintain the level of coaching and mentoring necessary under ASAP's rapid scale-up and sizeable growth.

The delays in hiring and onboarding and the shift to needs-based advising affected how ASAP advisors at BCC perceived their work. Although the hiring delays were resolved and a 150:1 student–advisor ratio reached again in mid to late fall 2017, advisors commented that the increase in enrollments constrained their time in new ways. Whereas before they had maintained smaller caseloads and been able to meet with students in person twice a month for half an hour, as ASAP expanded they reported difficulties maintaining this frequency of in-person meetings. One advisor said that since the expansion, "I have never had a day that is not busy. It gets hard to produce the results when the numbers keep increasing. . . . You can't deliver the same services." Some advisors described an intense schedule of back-to-back 30-minute advising sessions throughout the day.

Before the expansion, BCC ASAP advisors required all high-need students to meet with them in person individually twice a month. As the caseloads approached 150, advisors began to use other types of contacts as well, triaging students based on their level of need. One advisor reported conducting "fast-food" advising, or walk-in meetings for groups of students with similar concerns. Others described communicating by phone or email with certain students based on students' academic, personal, and other needs. Students' accounts of their advising experiences also reflected this shift. Some reported that their advisor requires them to meet one-on-one in person twice a month, while others noted they only had to meet one-on-one in person once a month and that the other meeting could take place by phone, by email, or in a group setting.

Colleges embarking on a large-scale reform with specialized staffing needs should ensure that their hiring infrastructure can support those needs.

BCC's experience with advising during the ASAP expansion illustrates some of the issues colleges can encounter as program policy changes are translated into practice. Building staff capacity was a particular challenge due to the time required to hire and train ASAP advisors. Colleges embarking on a large-scale reform with specialized staffing needs should ensure that their hiring infrastructure can support those needs and consider whether they need to adjust new-hire training or service delivery. Further, even with additional staffing, ASAP advisors at BCC experienced an increased intensity to their work as the program expanded. Institutions should consider (and regularly reassess) what additional supports their staff members may need when bringing programs to scale. Monitoring program implementation and staff and student experiences during an expansion will help institutions maintain program quality and quickly address challenges to implementation.

Staffing the Program at Scale

Before each wave of the ASAP expansion, CUNY OAA undertook a careful planning process with each college's expansion steering committee, reviewing staffing, program policies, and structures. As a result, CUNY OAA added new staff roles during the second wave of expansion, including ASAP recruiters at each college, an associate director to help supervise and support advisors once program enrollment reached 700, and a second associate director when program enrollment exceeded 3,500. BCC ASAP staff and administrators viewed these roles as integral to building capacity for the ASAP expansion. According to an ASAP administrator, the associate director worked to ensure that ASAP advisors understood the program's approach and provided them with ongoing support, performing a role that proved critical as the number of advisors increased.

Other staffing changes were made in response to emerging needs during the expansion. In 2017, CUNY OAA piloted an ASAP peer mentor program and facilitated the hiring and training of peer mentors at all colleges. These current and former ASAP students were hired to assist advisors by facilitating workshops and providing one-on-one support to students. A BCC peer mentor explained that the expansion had made it necessary to "fill gaps and find different ways to reach out to students and build relationships." Peer mentors at BCC generally described their role as fluid and dependent on the needs of students and program staff.

These staffing changes demonstrate how CUNY OAA and BCC assessed the needs of the program as it grew and identified areas for additional staffing and innovative solutions. Other institutions committed to scaling programs may similarly need to be flexible and open to changes in staffing.

Summary and Implications

BCC's experience illustrates how certain adaptations of ASAP were necessary to bring the program to scale. These adaptations were thoughtfully made through the collaborative efforts of BCC and CUNY OAA, whose joint steering committee helped establish priorities and plans for the expansion that kept stakeholders' efforts in line with ASAP's principles. The need to meet enrollment targets prompted CUNY OAA and BCC to align ASAP recruitment and enrollment processes with college admissions. To maintain advising quality, BCC ASAP advisors adopted a needs-based advising model that enabled them to take on larger caseloads while continuing to provide students with personalized attention. Finally, to maintain the quality of the program at scale, CUNY added new ASAP staff roles, including recruiters, associate directors, and peer mentors. Overall, these modifications to ASAP were motivated by the need to build capacity for achieving the scaling goals while maintaining program quality.

BCC's scale-up of ASAP is also noteworthy for its impact on other college functions. Because reforms typically target specific programs and student populations, institutions often focus on their impact on closely related college structures and program participants and pay less attention to how reforms impact the entire institution. BCC's efforts to streamline ASAP student recruitment and admissions practices illustrate the importance of taking a more global look at institutional functions when expanding reforms.

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Overall, the ASAP expansion at CUNY is unprecedented in its scope and scale. This ambitious initiative has the potential to improve educational and labor market outcomes for CUNY students, their families, and their communities—and what is more, it has national implications. ASAP's dramatic benefits are difficult to ignore, and colleges around the country are beginning to recognize that comprehensive reforms that affect students from matriculation through graduation are likely necessary to substantially improve graduation rates. Comprehensive reforms require institutions to rethink how they are organized and how they can redesign their structures (including programs) and related policies and practices. BCC's experiences with scaling ASAP allow for an important case study of the transformation of a higher education institution in service of better student outcomes. A second brief from this study will explore in more depth BCC's experience using the ASAP expansion as a catalyst for larger college redesign.

Endnotes

1. Research on barriers to degree completion for community college students suggests a variety of interconnected issues are at play, including issues related to students' academic momentum, financial obligations and aid, integration and sense of belonging, and need for relevant and timely student services (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013).
2. Students are referred to developmental or "remedial" courses if they are not deemed college-ready upon enrollment based on skills assessments in math, reading, and writing.
3. This cost has decreased slightly as the program has grown. According to CUNY's Office of Academic Affairs, the annual cost per student for the 2019 fiscal year is estimated at $3,440.
4. For a complete list of expansion priorities, see Bronx Community College (n.d.-b).
5. Students eligible for multiple special programs attend a separate session with information on ASAP and other programs.

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