

ASAP: The Spark that Ignited the Transformation

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Introduction

In 2006, Mayor Michael Bloomberg convened a Commission for Economic Opportunity in New York City, with the goal of identifying strategies to reduce poverty and increase pathways to economic success. Chancellor Matthew Goldstein of the City University of New York (CUNY) recommended the creation of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to meet the goals of the Commission's report. ASAP's mission was to create an environment in which at least 50% of the initial cohort of students could complete all associate degree requirements within three years, and then be placed in well-paying positions within their field of study or be ready to transfer to a four-year college to pursue a baccalaureate degree. The eligibility criteria necessary to be enrolled include: NYC residency, first-time freshman status or prior completion of 12 or fewer college credits, exemption from remediation, and enrollment in one of the seven Queensborough Community College (QCC) ASAP majors offered.

ASAP helps to reduce common stresses by providing students with the academic, social, and financial support they need to succeed. Generally, students attending an urban community college are commuter students who don't spend time on campus when not attending classes. This makes it difficult for the students to engage and identify with the college and their peers. ASAP works toward not only improved student retention and success but also increased engagement and identification with the college as well.

As the director, I led the development and implementation of the ASAP program, adhering to the guidelines provided to me by the central CUNY ASAP office. In February 2007, QCC created an ASAP Steering Committee,

composed of several department chairpersons, the vice president for academic affairs, and the director. This committee formalized the policies and rigors of the ASAP program. Choices of majors, course sequences, and specialized support services were created, staffing needs were determined, and job descriptions were delineated. Our staff consists of three student managers, a student management coordinator, a career and employment specialist, a full-time secretary, two part-time clerical employees, and the director. In the organization structure at QCC, we are located within Academic Affairs. Until this last May, I reported directly to the vice president for academic affairs, and I now report to the dean for academic affairs along with the CUNY ASAP director, who is located at the CUNY Board of Higher Education in Manhattan.

ASAP students attended a precollege summer orientation for three and a half days to introduce them to the ASAP program and staff, as well as to the college faculty and administration. This serves as a foundation to build meaningful relationships between the student managers and their students. ASAP students are required to attend full time (no less than 12 credits per semester) and attend classes in cohort groups, with condensed schedules and smaller classes. A condensed schedule permits commuter students the time necessary to devote to their educational pursuits as well as time for their other obligations, such as family or work. An “ASAP Power Hour” is also inserted into each student’s schedule in order to facilitate the student’s attendance at tutoring, student manager meetings, or at an ASAP or QCC activity.

ASAP Begins

QCC welcomed 228 ASAP students for the fall 2007 semester. They selected majors from seven areas of study: Accounting (25), Business Management (3), Business Administration (56), Computer Engineering Technology (17), Electronic Engineering Technology (12), Music Electronic Technology (11), and Liberal Arts and Sciences (104). All ASAP students receive the use of free textbooks, get monthly NYC bus and train passes (Metrocards), attend classes with block programming, receive enhanced tutoring, and on a biweekly basis meet with their ASAP student manager. ASAP students and faculty schedule study groups and review sessions prior to exams, and the students attend ASAP enrichment activities related to their fields of study. The ASAP student manager

is the point person for a specific cohort of students numbering from 50 to 78, grouped mostly by major field of study. In their biweekly meetings, students meet with their respective student managers once individually and once in a small group. Academics are highlighted along with attendance, participation in extracurricular activities, and any other issues the student wishes to discuss. Student managers maintain extensive logs in a Microsoft® Access database (ASAP Monthly Tracking Report) of student progress and problems. The log documents the meetings and conversations with both students and their instructors. Elements of the log include:

- Student name and ID number
- Major
- Faculty name of (all faculty members who teach the particular student)
- Brief notes about any meeting with faculty/advisor
- Brief notes about any meeting with student
- Reason for meeting using focus codes: Up to three codes may be selected from the drop-down menu in each column to best categorize the nature of a conversation with a student. The first code should reflect the primary focus of the meeting. If more than one topic was discussed, a secondary and additional code may be selected to indicate what was covered with the student. If documenting faculty contact, Code 9 is selected in the primary focus drop-down list only.

CODE DESCRIPTIONS

Student managers' codes	Legend for ASAP student manager tracking report codes
1. Academic issues	Any and all issues related to course taking, i.e., grades, tests, assignments, class participation, communication with faculty, classroom behavior, incompletes, academic standing, etc.
2. Attendance/Punctuality	Attendance and/or punctuality related to courses, tutoring, study/review sessions, and all other required activities
3. Domestic issues	Any and all issues related to home life, i.e., childcare, eldercare, domestic responsibilities, healthcare, housing, transportation, food cost/availability, bills, etc.
4. Institutional navigation	Any and all issues related to academic department(s), financial aid, bursar, book store, registration, library, and any other campus offices or departments
5. Social/Personal issues	Any and all issues related to communication and interaction with other ASAP students and staff, self-advocacy and confidence, adjustment to college life, dating/domestic relationships, mental and/or physical health needs, etc.
6. ASAP requirements	Any and all issues related to ASAP program requirements, services, and events: i.e., Metro cards, books, registration, events, meetings, etc.
7. Graduation/Transfer requirements	Any and all issues related to students meeting graduation requirements and majors, i.e., required courses, choice of major, credit accumulation, GPA, CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE), senior college search, transfer applications, etc.
8. Other	Any and all issues that don't fit into the above categories; please cite content in notes section of form
9. St. Mgr./Fac. Contact	Faculty to Student Manager contact (student not present)

The information documented in the log is continually reviewed to facilitate adjustments to the program (e.g., early warning report, added at-risk student counseling, exit interviews, and feedback to all participants).

Attributes and Problems

The student outcomes thus far indicate that the ASAP model is a positive influence on college student success. As shown in Table 1, the impact of ASAP on retention is demonstrated by the higher retention rate compared to a similar cohort from the previous year.

TABLE 1 | Fall to Fall Retention of ASAP and Comparison Group Students*

	Initial cohort	Reenrolled for spring semester (%)	Reenrolled for fall semester (%)	Reenrolled for spring semester (%)
ASAP	228	209 (91.7 %)	188 (82.5 %)	168 (73.68%)
Comparison group*	498	392 (78.7 %)	315 (63.3 %)	269 (54%)

**Fall 2006 full-time associate degree students who started the term with 12 or fewer credits, are proficient in reading, writing, and math, are not enrolled in developmental courses, are residents of New York City, and are enrolled in majors offered to ASAP students in fall 2007.*

Table 2 indicates that ASAP students attempt more credits, earn more credits, and have a higher GPA when compared to a similar cohort from a previous year.

TABLE 2 | Semester Performance of ASAP and Comparison Group Students*

	Credits attempted	Credits earned	First semester GPA
ASAP	13.2	10.8	2.63
Comparison group*	11.4	8.4	2.14

**Fall 2006 full-time associate degree students who started the term with 12 or fewer credits, are proficient in reading, writing, and math, are not enrolled in developmental courses, are residents of New York City, and are enrolled in majors offered to ASAP students in fall 2007.*

In addition, Table 3 reveals that ASAP students are on a faster track for graduation at the end of two years when compared to a similar cohort from a previous year. The three-year graduation rate at QCC ran from 11.8% to 15.3% in cohorts 2000 to 2005, respectively.

TABLE 3 | Projected Graduation Rates of ASAP and Comparison Group Students* at the End of Two Years

ASAP	Projected spring 2009 graduations 18.0%
Comparison group*	Spring 2008 graduations 5.2%

**Fall 2006 full-time associate degree students who started the term with 12 or fewer credits, are proficient in reading, writing, and math, are not enrolled in developmental courses, are residents of New York City, and are enrolled in majors offered to ASAP students in fall 2007.*

As with any new initiative, we have experienced a number of issues during the implementation of ASAP. The greatest issue we have addressed emerged from the participants, many of whom felt that, as college students, they should have the right to choose their own classes and schedule. These individuals wanted to be more a part of the college as a whole and to be involved in classes with other students. In examining this concern, however, we learned that block programming created certain cliques and bad behaviors among some students. At times there were ASAP blocks that “ganged up” against an instructor, agreeing as a group not to do homework, participate, or show up on time for classes or meetings. As students progress through their educational programs, they are now required to be in at least two classes each semester with other ASAP students. As you might guess, we have now received some student feedback indicating preference to ASAP classes over courses that mix ASAP students with other QCC students.

Student Managers

We have learned that the key component of success in the ASAP program is the relationship developed between the student and the student manager. Students attribute having a student manager and being together in classes as extremely helpful in fostering team learning, good friendships, and helpful peer support. One ASAP student remarked that, “If it was not for my Student Manager encouraging me to go to tutoring, I may never have passed some of my courses.” Another student wrote:

I wanted to let you know that I truly appreciate all that the ASAP staff has done. The fact that ASAP covers tuition is nice but it is the individual care that the Queensborough ASAP staff has for their students, that has impacted me the most. The Queensborough ASAP feels like a family. It's nice to know that when you have ANY problem (college related) you have someone you can rely on to help you through it. I'd be remiss to not mention how pleased I am with the job performance of my Student Manager. . . . She takes the time to go over each student's class schedule and talk to them about their decisions. This is extremely helpful because as a student I've found that although I may have one plan, she shows us that there other options which may be more efficient and/or beneficial overall. She has gone out and beyond for me and my fellow students.

Even now, with 30% of our initial cohort graduated, we find that former ASAP students are still in touch with their student managers and even come back to visit them. Financial incentives are certainly always welcome, but the personal touch is imperative!

Institutionalization and Applicability

The ASAP program was adapted to the entire Queensborough College freshman full-time community in fall 2009. At the time that Chancellor Goldstein recommended the creation of ASAP, QCC had been developing a freshman academy model. Starting in fall 2009, all first-time, full-time freshmen were admitted into one of six academies; like ASAP students, they were assigned to student managers, now renamed freshmen coordinators. Utilizing the ASAP program as the model for reorganizing the college's academic structure provides the basis for attaining the desired outcome of the academies: increased retention, graduation, and an exceptional overall educational experience.

At the September 2008 meeting of the QCC Academic Senate, Dr. Eduardo Marti, president of Queensborough Community College, announced: "We learned from ASAP that student managers make a difference in student retention, and now we are institutionalizing the concept." In the January 22, 2009, issue of CUNY Newswire he is quoted as saying, "It is clear to me, based on what we've learned from ASAP, that specially trained advisors in the Freshman Academies will be a keystone to its success in raising the retention and graduation rates of our students." The institutionalization of ASAP's major support mechanism, the student manager, provided the spark to move the college even further toward a student success model.

Just like ASAP students, each student will have an administrative "home" staffed by a secretary and a freshman coordinator. The freshman coordinators will act as bridges to departments throughout the college, including Financial Aid, Career Services, Advisement, Registration, Tutoring, and Counseling. Freshman coordinators will explain the requirements, career outcomes, and transfer possibilities for the programs of study and will make sure that students take the proper courses for their programs to facilitate timely graduation. Freshman coordinators will be responsible for ensuring that the students attend classes, get the help they need, and feel welcome at the college. Each freshman

coordinator will also be a “go to” person for any issues or problems which may affect academic progress in and outside the classroom. Freshman coordinators will introduce students to the academy’s (and the college’s) academic and extracurricular opportunities and will work with students and faculty within an academy to assist students in reaching their academic and career goals.

Most aspects of ASAP are definitely replicable on a larger scale. The variables at other institutions would most likely involve available funding, personnel, and space. Whether or not the program is amenable to adaptation and adoption by other institutions is, in part, demonstrated by the initial review of the QCC model. The Center for Economic Opportunity in the mayor’s office provided the initial funding for the program, and we have already been promised funding for another three years beginning in fall 2010!

As we have expanded the ASAP program into an institution-wide academy model, our goal is that the interactions between the students and the freshmen coordinators—along with the extended orientation, high impact activities, dedicated spaces for group learning, and the dedicated student activities—should have a significant impact on retention and graduation rate for all first-time, full-time students. While preserving the open admissions policy and welcoming all who come to QCC, we hope that this extraordinary effort to concentrate academic and student support services provided to freshmen will result in enhanced institution-wide retention and graduation rates.¹

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