

**City Council Testimony of Donna Linderman, University Executive Director,
CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to the
New York City Council Committee on Higher Education, October 24, 2011**

Members of the Committee: My name is Donna Linderman and I am proud to serve as the University Executive Director of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program at CUNY. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about ASAP and our students.

ASAP was created in 2007 with support from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, and is designed to help students earn their Associate's degrees as quickly as possible, with a goal of graduating 50% of students within three years. To accomplish this, CUNY has assembled a structured pathway with program elements, support services and financial incentives that improve the retention, performance, and graduation rates of community college students.

Key ASAP elements include required full-time study in cohorts in a limited number of majors, consolidated course schedules, small class size, comprehensive advisement, academic and career development services, and special programs to support student growth and success. We provide financial incentives to remove the barriers to full-time study including tuition waivers for financial-aid eligible students and free monthly Metrocards and use of textbooks for all students.

ASAP is found at all six community colleges and our current enrollment is 1,338. Our students are largely minority and low income. Most work, many have children of their own and are the first in their families to attend college. Far too many have challenging personal circumstances that would suggest that attending college full-time and graduating within three years are not likely outcomes. Our students, however, are living testaments that circumstances do not have to define who you are. With a structured pathway and the right supports, our students are succeeding in previously unimaginable ways and have helped to make ASAP one of CUNY's most successful programs and a national model for what is possible at community colleges.

When we began in 2007 with a cohort of 1,132 students across all CUNY community colleges, the 3-year graduation rate for similar CUNY students was 24%. At the national level, urban

community colleges had a 3-year graduation rate of 16%. After three years with ASAP, our fall 2007 cohort of 1,132 students realized a graduation rate of 55%.

Bolstered by these success rates, we wanted to see if our ASAP model could be similarly effective for less prepared students. Therefore, in fall 2009, ASAP began to enroll students with some developmental needs based on their scores on the CUNY Assessment Test, students who were also in receipt of federal Pell grants or with family income within 200% of federal poverty guidelines. After two years in the program, our fall 2009 cohort has demonstrated that they too are capable of achieving at astonishing rates. Our fall 2009 cohort, which entered with 1-2 developmental course needs, have just realized a *two-year* graduation rate of 27.5% as of September 2011 versus 7.2% for a comparison group of similar students. It is our strong belief that this group of students will also meet our 50% target by next summer after three years in the program.

ASAP student demographics mirror what you would find at any of our community college campuses. Here is a snapshot of our fall 2009 cohort, which recently demonstrated such impressive 2-year graduation rates: Nearly 77% of students began the program with developmental needs, 73% are Black and Hispanic, 60% are Female/40% male with a mean age of 22, 56% are the first in their immediate family to graduate from college, 84% received a Pell grant, and they had a mean family income of \$26,103.

ASAP holds itself to high evaluation standards. Our rigorous evaluation agenda includes regular quantitative and qualitative analysis and a standardized data system to ensure we can regularly assess the efficacy of our services to students. Student outcomes have been rigorously assessed using a constructed comparison group methods and regression analysis to control for differences among students. Data are examined not only within CUNY, but we welcome feedback from our partners at the Center for Economic Opportunity and their external evaluators, who have helped us refine our evaluation approaches. We are also pleased to be involved in a major research study of ASAP led by MDRC, one of the most respected independent companies conducting research in higher education. Nine hundred students are now part of a 5-year experimental design random assignment study that began last spring at three community colleges at BMCC, Kingsborough, and LaGuardia. Early findings are promising and a first report is expected out in early 2012.

Let me give you a little more detail about the ASAP program experience. We provide a structured pathway from entrance to graduation. Students are recruited after they have been admitted to one of our community colleges and taken the CUNY Assessment Test. ASAP staff meet with every student to describe program benefits and expectations. Students with developmental needs are strongly encouraged to enroll in summer immersion to get a head start on their basic skills needs. All students participate in a 3-4 day summer institute before they join ASAP, an institute designed to build community through arts education activities.

Once the semester begins, students take their classes in a consolidated morning, afternoon, evening, or weekend block schedule to help them balance school, work, and domestic responsibilities. ASAP students take at least 12 credits each semester, which positions them to receive full financial aid benefits. During the first year of the program, students take 3-5 classes in cohort blocks with other ASAP students. ASAP classes do not usually exceed 25 students, allowing for more frequent interaction with classmates and faculty. Students with developmental need take these courses immediately and continuously and attend tutoring. We also offer weekly seminars on common issues and so as to enhance students' communication skills, confidence, and study skills. We also aggressively promote winter and summer course taking to increase credit momentum.

Our comprehensive and personalized support services foster a sense of community among students and staff. Students need more than a road map, they need caring adults who know them to guide them through from entrance to graduation. They also need a network of peers who are there beside them on the journey. Describing his experience in Kingsborough ASAP, Jamel James, who was raised by a single mother in Brooklyn, says "Everyone in ASAP helped me grow as a person, staff and students alike. Everyone played a part in my development." Jamel graduated from Kingsborough in two years, mentored high school students, and was also chosen for a highly selective New York Needs You fellowship. He is now working towards a bachelor's degree in Public Affairs at Baruch and hopes to go to law school.

ASAP advisors meet with assigned students, currently caseloads of 60-80 students, twice each month, in both individual and group sessions. Advisors also follow up regularly with faculty on student progress to ensure that students who need additional support such as tutoring or counseling are referred in a timely manner. ASAP students overwhelmingly give strong ratings for ASAP advisement on our annual surveys, in focus groups, in interviews and in testimonials at end-of-year events. Geizel Amadour from LaGuardia Community College, who earned her associate's degree in two years and also just completed her bachelor's at Queens College, calls ASAP "my family away from home. They provided me with the confidence to achieve what I thought I couldn't and to challenge myself in a way I normally wouldn't."

ASAP career and employment specialists on each campus also meet with students to discuss long-term career goals, address immediate employment needs, and facilitate workshops on interviewing, resume writing, and networking. Nathaniel Wheeler, a graduate from BMCC, single father and veteran, took immediate advantage of ASAP career services. "Through ASAP I not only have the opportunity to advance scholastically, but I also gained personally. It was at an ASAP-sponsored career fair that I acquired my current position (at Macy's in the accounting department), which now allows me to work in my field of study."

ASAP has become a model both within and outside of CUNY based on its impressive graduation rates and rigorous evaluation. Last year, CEO designated ASAP funding, at its current level, as an ongoing allocation to CUNY's operating budget. We have secured private funding from several foundations to support the random assignment study of ASAP and a transfer scholarship program for graduates who matriculate to select CUNY 4-year colleges. The program is regularly cited in major publications on community colleges, at national higher education forums, and by respected funding and policy makers as a successful evidence-based program that should be considered for scaling.

Earlier this month, CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein announced the University's intent to expand ASAP over the next three years, with the goal of reaching an enrollment of more than 4,000 students by fall 2014. The expanded program will operate on a lower per-student cost, but will require significant additional funding to serve this many students—three times the current

number. Chancellor Goldstein has made it clear, however, that CUNY and all higher education systems across this country must act boldly to prepare students for the demands of an increasingly competitive economy. I can think of no better investment in the future of our city than the degree attainment prospects of the men and women who come to CUNY community colleges every year through programs like ASAP, because such an investment will be returned tenfold. Our graduates enter the workforce with credentials that will increase their lifelong earning potential, and that will ensure that they become engaged, healthier and more informed citizens, neighbors, and employees, as well as serving as role models for their families and communities. Our ASAP students--the ones we serve today and hope to serve tomorrow--are truly the future of our city and this country, and they deserve nothing less than our best efforts and deepest commitment to their success. Thank you.