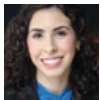
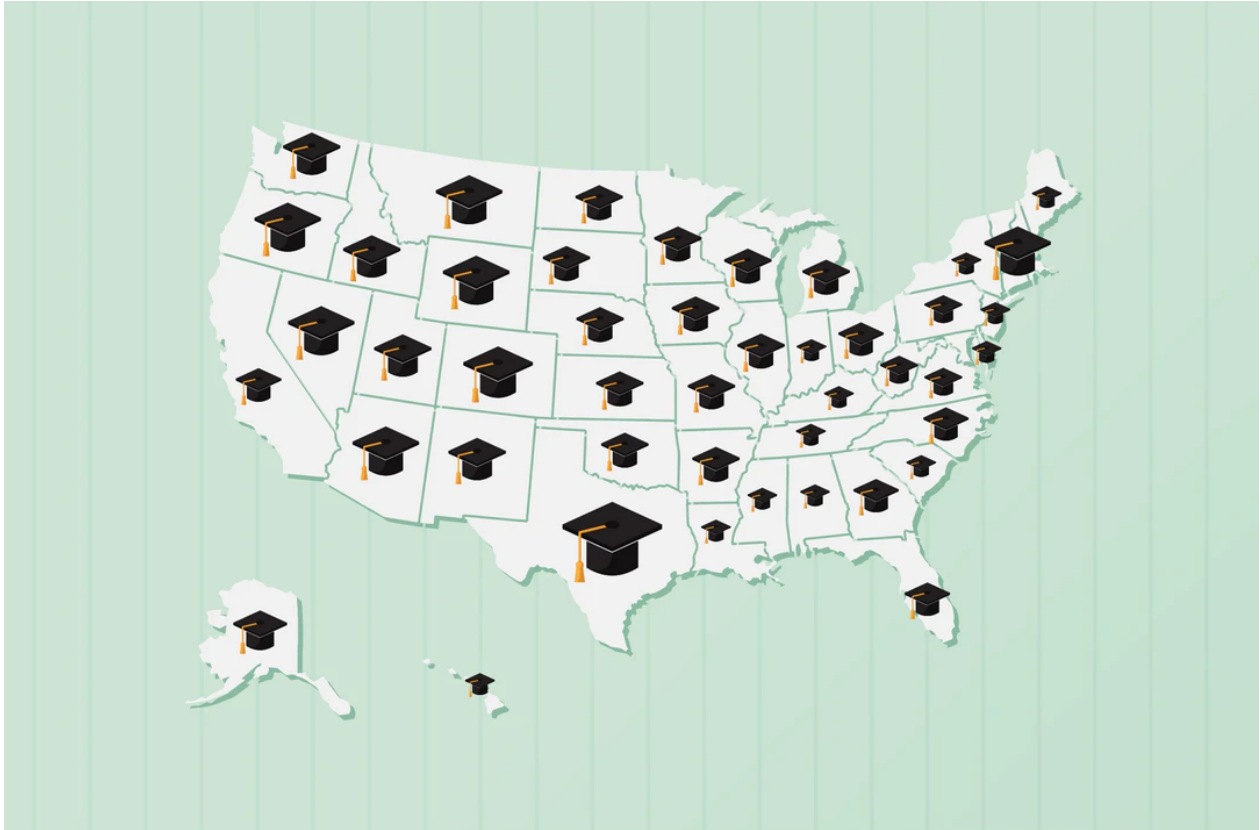


# What if CUNY ASAP Was Replicated from Coast to Coast?



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When it comes to turning the tide on college completion, few interventions have made as much of a splash as CUNY ASAP, the City University of New York system’s trailblazing student success program. The ASAP model not only doubled three-year community college graduation rates at the schools where it was originally implemented, but also showed similarly large effects when replicated at other schools in very different institutional and regional contexts, including three community colleges in Ohio.

A first-of-its-kind federal College Completion Fund, as proposed in President Biden’s American Families Plan, would offer a major opportunity to scale evidence-based retention and completion programs like ASAP and support exponentially more students in their efforts to get across the finish line to a college degree. Directing \$62 billion in funding for these programs over the next decade to colleges that serve students from low-income backgrounds and communities of color would have huge equity implications, investing in the students and schools the higher education

system has historically disadvantaged, underserved, and under-resourced. And increasing overall degrees earned among those who start higher education would reap significant public benefits and lead to better personal and professional outcomes over the long term for millions of Americans and their families.

So, let's try a thought experiment to understand the true potential of investing in getting students not just *to* but *through* college. Let's say CUNY ASAP were replicated at every community college across the country. What kind of impact could we expect to see ten years out?

In the Fall 2020 term, about 780,000 first-time students enrolled in public two-year colleges.<sup>1</sup> If current national trends hold, we could expect roughly 30% of those students, or 234,000, to graduate within three years. But robust evaluations of CUNY ASAP by MDRC found that ASAP participation increased degree attainment by 18.3 percentage points (40.1% of ASAP students earned a degree from any college within three years compared to 21.8% of students in the control group) and the ASAP replication in Ohio showed similar effectiveness, with an overall 16 percentage point increase in three-year graduation rates (35% of ASAP participants graduated compared to 19% for the control group). If we round up and estimate that, if done effectively, a large-scale expansion of ASAP-style interventions could increase the national three-year graduation rate by up to 20%, we could see 390,000 of last year's first-time community college enrollees graduating (50% overall) rather than 234,000. Over ten years, that would mean 1.56 million more associate degree holders than current trends would predict—and more bachelor's degrees too since some students would not only persist through two years of college but go on to transfer and continue their education at a four-year school.

Associate degree holders participate in the labor force at a much higher rate than those with only a high school diploma, so 1.56 million new associate degree holders could translate to at least a million additional employees in the labor force (67.2% of those new associate degree graduates, and an even higher percentage among those who go on to get a bachelor's degree). Likewise, we could expect declines in the overall unemployment rate, given that degree holders have lower unemployment than those who have only graduated high school.

Higher levels of degree attainment and employment rates would lead to higher earnings, too: Over a decade, 1.56 million extra associate degree holders between the ages of 25 and 34 could earn at least an additional \$8.1 billion combined based on the median earnings for that age range, while those who go on to obtain further degrees stand to earn even more. And a rise in individual earning potential sets off a meaningful ripple effect for society writ large, leading to lower poverty levels, less reliance on public assistance programs, higher lifetime income tax payments, larger Social Security contributions—and even better health and longer life expectancies. A 2015 Lumina Foundation report estimated the value of lifetime taxes (including sales, property, state, and federal income tax payments) at \$201,341 for an associate degree holder compared to \$136,564 for a high school graduate, for an individual increase of \$64,777. Extending that out to account for 1.56 million

additional associate degrees could mean an increase of more than \$100 billion in new tax revenue over a decade.

While these broad-strokes data points offer a thought experiment based on just one of many proven student success interventions (and there are fantastic programs focused on improving bachelor's degree graduation rates as well), the exercise underscores the bigger picture at stake as Congress debates the ultimate funding level of the College Completion Fund in the budget reconciliation process. As we are poised to further broaden access to postsecondary education through proposals for tuition-free community college and Pell Grant award increases to help low-income students keep up with rising costs, it's critical to follow through on the commitment those investments signal to students by also funding evidence-based programs that will help them not just enroll but also persist and cross the finish line to a degree. And with models as well-proven as CUNY ASAP on the table, the federal government should aim to expand these programs' impact through a substantial investment—one that has the potential to transform outcomes for both today's students and tomorrow's workers and families.

#### TOPICS

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## ENDNOTES

1. Due to the impacts of COVID-19, this figure is significantly lower than prior years, representing a 21% enrollment decline in the community college sector. See: *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*, “Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Fall 2020,” [nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE\\_Report\\_Fall\\_2020.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf). Accessed 28 Aug. 2021.