HOW DOES THE ASAP MODEL ALIGN WITH GUIDED PATHWAYS IMPLEMENTATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES?

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Community colleges that are exploring ways to dramatically improve outcomes for their students frequently seek a better understanding of the relationship between two "branded" approaches receiving significant publicity: **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)** and **guided pathways**.

ASAP was created by the City University of New York (CUNY); MDRC evaluated the program in a random assignment study from 2010 to 2015, and CUNY continues to evaluate it through quasi-experimental analysis. Guided pathways is a strategy pioneered in four-year schools, including Georgia State and Florida State Universities, and championed by many national community college reform advocates, including Achieving the Dream, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Complete College America (CCA), and Jobs for the Future.

Colleges often ask how a "program" such as ASAP aligns with the "comprehensive institutional reform" approach of guided pathways. This question is understandable: CCRC researchers cite ASAP as an important evidence-based guided pathways intervention — a specific program model that can be a component of an institution's overall guided pathways approach. In a 2015 research overview, CCRC used early ASAP evaluation results as positive evidence for the emphasis that guided pathways efforts place on "higher levels of structure and support."[1]

This document draws out more clearly the similarities and differences between ASAP and guided pathways strategies and the research evidence that informs each. It suggests how the two

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1   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015b), p. 4.

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might be aligned in community colleges seeking to dramatically improve student outcomes.

Both guided pathways and ASAP are designed to significantly increase community college degree completion. At a high level, they have similar perspectives, rooted in a common understanding of the following factors:

- **AN EMPIRICAL REALITY:** low completion rates at the nation's community colleges

- **A CRITIQUE OF CURRENT COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRIORITIES:** too little emphasis on structure, acceleration, outcome-focused student support, and completion

- **AN APPROACH TO IMPROVING OUTCOMES:** the need for integrated, comprehensive institutional reform efforts that make the path to completion more transparent to students and provide a structure and set of support services that help more students succeed

At the same time, though, there are important differences between ASAP and guided pathways. ASAP is a specific program model with required components. Its components and costs are known; its positive impact on particular student groups has been proven. Guided pathways is a broad approach to institutional reform based on a distillation of several decades of research. However, the framework represented by guided pathways is relatively new and has not been evaluated. Rather, the framework provides a set of principles and practices that a college can embrace as a map for

institution-wide redesign of basic procedures and policies. According to CCRC's Davis Jenkins, ASAP is a *best practice* identified through rigorous research while guided pathways suggests a set of *best process* principles identified through organizational and behavioral science combined with early lessons from several colleges that have launched large-scale implementation.[2] Guided pathways advocates do not specify a model with required elements, preferring to give colleges a framework and set of design principles for reform.

In addition, ASAP and guided pathways differ in important ways on two key questions: (1) which aspects of the community college experience are most important to change, and (2) what bundle of institutional interventions is most likely to dramatically improve success rates for low-income students.

This document begins with a description of similarities and differences between ASAP and guided pathways and then summarizes the research base for each. The document presents an approach for institutions to reconcile and align the ASAP model with a guided pathways framework for change. The final section addresses what is known about the costs of implementing both ASAP and guided pathways.

PROBLEM DEFINITIONS AND THEORIES OF CHANGE

ASAP

ASAP targets three challenges faced by community college students that stand in the way of persistence and completion, particularly among low-income students:

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2   Jenkins (2014).

- **FINANCIAL BURDENS:** the unmet need, after financial aid, to cover the costs of tuition, books, and transportation

- **INADEQUATE SUPPORT:** limited advisement for students on program and course selection and on career choice; underemphasis on academic catch-up and tutoring; scarce resources to help students improve nonacademic soft skills

- **ACADEMIC UNDERPREPAREDNESS:** the high percentage of students requiring developmental (remedial) courses and the difficulty these students have mastering basic skills and moving quickly to earn credentials

ASAP is designed to help community college students at risk of not completing a credential, particularly low-income students. Eligibility criteria target students who receive a federal Pell grant or have family income within 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.[3] ASAP serves students who are college-ready and those with one or two developmental course needs. The academically underprepared population overlaps significantly with the low-income student population in CUNY and in two-year colleges nationally.[4]

ASAP's reform priorities are built on CUNY's analysis of the challenges students face and on interventions that have a rigorous evidence base:

- **INTRUSIVE ADVISING:** Because students traditionally get limited advice about how to choose from a bewildering array of courses and programs once they enroll in community college, ASAP provides students with mandatory, comprehensive, proactive advising — often called "intrusive" advising — from a staff member with a relatively small, ASAP-only caseload (80 students in the initial model and now closer to 150), as well as career development assistance from a dedicated ASAP staff member.

- **ACCELERATION:** Because students who move quickly to fulfill program requirements are more likely to complete their degrees, ASAP requires students to enroll full time and imparts to students early and often the expectation that they graduate within three years.

- **FINANCIAL SUPPORT:** Because financial insecurity reduces students' ability to attend full time and to persist in school when life throws them a curve, ASAP provides additional support to cover any tuition and fees gap after financial aid each fall and spring. The program also provides textbook vouchers at the beginning of each semester, tuition coverage for summer and winter sessions, and a monthly incentive in the form of transportation assistance (in New York City, the coveted unlimited MetroCard that allows students to travel to work, school, home, and other responsibilities as needed).

- **ACADEMIC SUPPORT:** Because academic underpreparedness threatens students' ability to advance in a credit program toward efficient completion, ASAP encourages students to take any needed developmental courses early, offers group advisement that covers topics such as goal

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3 CUNY's recent expansion of ASAP has opened the program to include students who do not receive financial aid. All students must still apply for federal and state financial aid in order to be part of ASAP. Only students who receive financial aid and have a gap need between need-based aid (federal Pell Grants and New York State Tuition Assistance Program) and their tuition and fees are eligible to receive an ASAP tuition waiver to cover the gap need. All ASAP students receive MetroCards and textbook support. Today, about 75 percent of ASAP students are Pell-eligible, indicating that the program still predominantly serves low-income students.

4 See Boykin and Prince (2015) for more information on the ASAP model and student population.

setting and study skills, and requires students to attend tutoring while in developmental courses or on academic probation.

- **DATA FOR IMPROVEMENT:** To reinforce program components and promote continuous improvement, the ASAP program staff collects extensive data on student participation and outcomes, as well as on key implementation milestones.

ASAP does not target curriculum redesign: Course choices are more structured and better supported for ASAP students than for the typical community college student, but ASAP designers chose to make a priority of reforms external to the classroom, rather than curricular or instructional reforms.

Guided Pathways

For CCRC, "the idea behind guided pathways is straightforward":

> College students are more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the courses they need to take to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on plan.[5]

The primary challenge from the guided pathways perspective is the combination of too many course and program options and too little guidance — the "cafeteria" or "self-service" model of the American college — which contributes to students meandering through college and failing to persist to timely completion. The alternative that guided pathways advocates propose is an integrated, institution-wide strategy built around clear, educationally coherent program maps — which include

specific course sequences, progress milestones, and learning outcomes — aligned with what will be expected of graduates in the workplace or in further education.[6]

For proponents of guided pathways, the most important conceptual and institutional shift is from encouraging students to take the right *courses* to making it more likely that they will enroll and succeed in the right *program*. In the conclusion to *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, Tom Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins summarize their view:

> We have argued that instead of expecting students to find their own way through college, colleges need to create clear, educationally coherent program pathways that are aligned with students' end goals, help students explore and select a pathway of interest, and track and support students' progress along their chosen pathway.[7]

Given this perspective, the guided pathways approach emphasizes components that overlap with, but are somewhat different from, those of ASAP:

- **PROGRAM STREAMLINING AND DEFINITION:** Clear pathways that are backward-mapped from completion are at the heart of efforts to redefine and streamline credential programs, along with support that enables and pushes students to select a program and pathway early and to enroll in it full time. Specific reforms include degree maps developed by faculty members that specify course sequences and clearly define the learning outcomes for the programs of study; required enrollment in one's first or second semester in

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5   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015b), p. 1.

6   See Community College Research Center and the AACC Pathways Project (2016) for more information.

7   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015a), p. 199.

a well-defined "exploratory" or "meta-" major in a broad field of interest (for example, health sciences or business); and ensuring the college offers courses in a coherent semester sequence that, when followed, leads to on-time completion.

- **ON-RAMPS AND BASIC SKILLS MASTERY:** Developmental education itself was not front-and-center in early guided pathways formulations. The guided pathways model wants fewer students to take stand-alone prerequisite developmental education courses — representing a greater break from business as usual than ASAP, which emphasizes taking developmental requirements immediately and with adequate support in place. To create faster and better "on-ramps" to a college-level program of study, many colleges pursuing guided pathways reforms are turning to corequisite models championed by Complete College America, with basic skills taught in conjunction with critical college-level "gateway" courses in specific pathways.

- **CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION:** Bailey and his coauthors believe that the structural changes inherent in the guided pathways model demand corresponding instructional changes at the classroom level, replacing a traditional "knowledge transmission" model with one that focuses on building learning skills.[8] Improvements in curricular alignment with four-year colleges or workplace demands and pedagogies that emphasize project- and competency-based instruction are seen as critical to ensuring that students master skills they need to pursue further education or advance in the labor market.

- **TRANSFER POLICY:** The goal of aligning programs with requirements for further education and career advancement means that transfer policy and transfer agreements with four-year colleges and other schools are important parts of guided pathways strategy and reform. Links to feeder high schools and their programs of study are also important.

- **TRACKING, FEEDBACK, AND SUPPORT:** Like ASAP, guided pathways emphasizes the collection of accurate, real-time data and the provision of frequent feedback to students, instructors, and advisers, including early alerts that set in motion support services for struggling students.

- **POPULATION FOCUS:** The guided pathways approach is not promoted explicitly as a strategy for addressing the special needs of low-income and academically underprepared students. However, there is wide recognition among guided pathways advocates that these populations are at highest risk of failure when navigating the "cafeteria" model that characterizes most college offerings.

Guided pathways is described by Bailey and his CCRC colleagues as "a framework for higher education reform."[9] This may be the biggest difference between guided pathways and ASAP: Guided pathways is not a proven program model but rather a set of design principles intended to guide institutional reform and policy changes needed to support change on a significant scale over time.

It is too early to tell what guided pathways institutions will look like over time — and which variants will diffuse most broadly or have the strongest impacts on student outcomes. Because guided

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8   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015a).

9   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015a), p. 211.

pathways advocates the adoption of a range of research-informed principles rather than a specific model, implementing institutions are experimenting with diverse clusters of reforms.

The AACC Pathways Project, for example, is supporting 30 community colleges that have signed on to building guided pathways systems, focusing on four dimensions of student experience: (1) clarifying the paths to students' end goals, (2) helping students choose and enter a pathway, (3) helping students stay on their path, and (4) ensuring that students are getting the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in employment or further education in their chosen field. Unlike some earlier guided pathways frameworks, this formulation puts significant emphasis on ways to help less-prepared students move quickly and successfully into a program of study from "on-ramps" that strengthen program-relevant basic skills.[10]

Complete College America's Guided Pathways to Success (GPS) model, working with four states and the District of Columbia, has a somewhat different emphasis. CCA makes on-time completion a priority and is highly prescriptive in the model it expects GPS institutions to implement, requiring full-time enrollment in pathways where course sequences are clearly specified, excess credits are eliminated, and specific milestone courses must be completed by program enrollees each semester.[11]

EVIDENCE BASE FOR ASAP AND GUIDED PATHWAYS

What is known about the outcomes for ASAP and guided pathways efforts in colleges around the country? CUNY ASAP's impacts on student outcomes have been well researched. In contrast, as CCRC notes, "No rigorous research to date has been conducted on whether whole-college guided pathways reforms improve student outcomes."[12] Evidence brought to bear for guided pathways tends to focus on the power of individual components of the guided pathways approach, as well as early results from colleges implementing such reforms.

ASAP

MDRC's three-year random assignment evaluation of ASAP, based on a sample of 900 students from two ASAP cohorts who entered with developmental needs, found that ASAP students outperformed the control group students with respect to persistence, credit accumulation, full-time enrollment, three-year graduation, and transfer to four-year colleges.[13]

- The three-year graduation rate was nearly double that of the control group students (40 percent for the study group versus 22 percent for the control group).

- At the end of the three-year study period, 25 percent of the ASAP students were enrolled in a four-year school (versus 17 percent of the control group).

- ASAP generated positive outcomes for all student subpopulations studied.

MDRC reports that ASAP's positive effects are the largest it has ever found in any of its evaluations of community college reform models.

10   Community College Research Center and the AACC Pathways Project (2016).

11   Complete College America (2013).

12   Bailey, Jaggars, and David (2015b), p. 4.

13   Scrivener et al. (2015).

CUNY's own ongoing evaluation of ASAP, using a quasi-experimental constructed comparison group design, found the following:[14]

- Across six cohorts, ASAP has an average three-year graduation rate of 52 percent versus 27 percent for comparison group students.

- Students who start ASAP with developmental needs graduate at higher rates than the comparison group. After three years, 47 percent of ASAP students with developmental needs have graduated, compared with 22 percent of the non-ASAP students.

- ASAP's impact on graduation rates was found for all racial and ethnic subgroups and for those receiving Pell grants.

Guided Pathways

Because guided pathways has been designed as an approach to institution-wide reform, it would be difficult to implement a random assignment evaluation that could compare guided pathways student outcomes with those of nonparticipants and thereby demonstrate that guided pathways caused the outcomes. Given this constraint, the supporting evidence for guided pathways is of three types: high-level evidence from organizational, behavioral, and cognitive science that supports its design principles; evaluation evidence from higher education institutions that have implemented particular components of guided pathways; and lessons from colleges that are in the early stages of large-scale implementation, such as City Colleges of Chicago, Queensborough Community College, and Florida State University.

Proponents of guided pathways point to the research literature outside higher education (for example, from primary and secondary education and from behavioral and management science) that supports the strategy's core design principles: the importance of simplified choices and ongoing reminders and feedback in promoting desired behaviors; the positive influence of curricular coherence on student learning gains; and the power of aligning organization-wide practices in pursuit of clearly measurable goals.

As noted above, CCRC cites ASAP outcomes as evidence of the importance of higher levels of structure and support in college, a key guided pathways design element. Findings from quasi-experimental research on the state of Washington's I-BEST program, which helps adult basic skills students earn certificates in postsecondary career and technical education programs, are cited to support another design element, the integration of basic skills instruction with college-level technical skill instruction, as well as program designs that enroll students in a whole-program schedule of prescribed courses. Additional CCRC research using data from a single state finding "a strong correlation between early program entry and degree completion or transfer" is also highlighted. In this study, more than half the students who entered a program of study in their first year earned a credential or transferred within five years; for students who waited until the third year to enroll in a specific program, the success rate was only around 20 percent.[15]

Finally, CCRC notes descriptive — but not causal — evidence from several two- and four-year institutions implementing guided pathways initiatives, including Florida State University and CUNY's

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14 Strumbos, Kolenovic, and Tavares (2016); Strumbos and Kolenovic (2016).

15 Jenkins (2014).

newest two-year school, Guttman Community College. In the early 2000s, Florida State implemented default academic program maps, required enrollment in exploratory majors, and expanded proactive advising. The four-year graduation rate increased from 44 percent to 61 percent, and the year-to-year retention rate for first-time-in-college freshmen rose from 86 percent to 92 percent between 2000 and 2009.[16]

RECONCILING ASAP AND GUIDED PATHWAYS

There is obvious compatibility and overlap between ASAP and guided pathways innovations; it should be possible to integrate the two in an institutional reform effort focused on improving structure, coherence, and support for community college students.

ASAP and guided pathways share an emphasis on acceleration, full-time enrollment, structured programs that offer fewer choices and more support, greater transparency of paths to completion for students, and more mandatory and intrusive advising from day one through completion. Perhaps most important, both ASAP and guided pathways recognize the need for broad and integrated institutional change and reject approaches that nibble around the edges of college practice.

One way to conceptualize alignment between ASAP and guided pathways is to see ASAP as a tested, specific model with a strong evidence base that can be incorporated into guided pathways initiatives. Building ASAP into a guided pathways initiative can address some of the difficulties inherent in trying to implement a set of principles

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16 Jenkins (2014).

rather than a tested model. ASAP can be a good place to begin if an institution is trying to launch a guided pathways effort but staff members don't know how to knit together some of the key institutional reforms that guided pathways promotes. Adopting ASAP might enable colleges to eliminate the need to start from scratch in putting specific guided pathways reforms into practice, particularly in areas such as intrusive advising, tutoring, and career planning, accelerated completion of developmental and gatekeeper math and English courses, and increasing full-time enrollment rates.

Some core ASAP elements that are not a priority in guided pathways plans — such as financial support and incentives for low-income students — could be integrated into a comprehensive guided pathways-based institutional reform effort. Similarly, some design elements that are foundational to guided pathways — such as the structured process for mapping and streamlining program paths — could benefit an institution implementing ASAP if those revisions were made universally, thus easing the burden on ASAP staff members. Finally, some reform elements, though shared, are more fully developed in one or the other approach: ASAP's intrusive advising component is a tested innovation and has been refined during the past few years. Conversely, guided pathways program maps and technology solutions being incorporated into reform efforts could strengthen next-generation ASAP programs.

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT ASAP AND GUIDED PATHWAYS COSTS

Institutions and state leaders interested in both ASAP and guided pathways want to understand the cost implications of these reforms — and whether there might be efficiencies to the inte-

gration of the two approaches in a comprehensive institutional reform effort. Unfortunately, available information about costs does not allow for a comparative analysis. While ASAP program and component costs are clear, there are currently no estimates of what it costs to effectively implement any specific guided pathways institutional intervention. As a result, there is no way to do an apples-to-apples analysis or to quantify cost efficiencies that could emerge from the integration of ASAP and guided pathways.

The costs of the CUNY ASAP model are well documented. The additional cost, above usual CUNY full-time enrollment allocations, of the three-year CUNY ASAP project evaluated by MDRC was $4,676 per student per year for the study cohorts.[17] At current scale with students enrolled at nine colleges, CUNY estimates per-student additional cost to have dropped to around $3,700 per student per year. The Ohio ASAP demonstration project based on the ASAP model has an even lower per participant cost at about $3,000 per student per year, based on local salaries and adjustments made to the model to suit the local context.[18]

Henry Levin of the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, conducted a cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit study of CUNY ASAP. Because ASAP leads students to graduate more quickly, and because more students graduate overall, the study found an average savings of $6,500 per graduate.[19] When the analysis was broadened to include possible increases in future earnings and tax revenues as well as the possibility of reduced social service costs, Levin and his team estimated the total net benefits of 1,000 enrolled ASAP students as $46.5 million higher than for a comparison group of 1,000 non-ASAP students.[20]

Bailey and his colleagues have modeled the overall cost implications of moving from a cafeteria model of community college operations to a guided pathways approach and have specified the largest sources of additional costs. However, their analysis does not include specific per student cost estimates. The authors focus on "pathway cost," defined as "the institution's spending on an individual student as he or she takes courses over time."[21] They distinguish between the pathway cost *per student* and the pathway cost *per completion*. They show that by removing obstacles to progression — for example, implementing developmental education reform that reduces the number of students who enroll in and take remedial courses — the cost per completion can be reduced. Conversely, though, ill-considered cost-cutting — for example, increasing the student-to-adviser ratio — is likely to result in higher cost per completion. They then show how improving institutional performance on intermediate milestones along the way to completion (for example, a 20 percent increase in earning 12 or more credits in Year 1) would affect pathway cost, completion rates, pathway cost per completion, and net revenue for the institution as patterns of enrollment, persistence, and time to completion shift.

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17   Scrivener et al. (2015).

18   Sommo and Ratledge (2016).

19   Levin and Garcia (2012).

20   Levin and Garcia (2013).

21   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015a), p. 176.

The CCRC researchers conclude that a well-run institution that adopts the guided pathways approach can improve student completion and lower pathway cost per completion — with only a small effect on overall institutional revenue.

As for overall cost implications, Bailey and his colleagues suggest that "community colleges will require somewhat more resources to design and implement guided pathways successfully, increase efficiency without jeopardizing educational quality, maintain access for disadvantaged students, and remain responsive to community needs."[22] Costs will go up as more students persist and as reforms require additional per student investment. Net operating costs are likely to rise modestly, they conclude, and short-term transitional costs will be incurred for planning and implementation, faculty and staff professional development, and upgraded information systems to track and communicate with students. While colleges that have implemented guided pathways reforms are described as seeming to cover costs of the initiative by reallocating existing resources, the authors see the need for more state investment to cover costs beyond those that can be supported by reallocation.[23]

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22   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015a), p. 192.

23   Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015a).

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