



Charting Pathways

Three-Year Findings from the Viking ROADS Demonstration

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In community colleges in the United States, graduation rates remain frustratingly low.¹ Students face many challenges, including the financial costs of attending college; the demands of school, work, and family; complex institutional systems; underfunded student support services; and insufficient preparation for college-level work.²

To address these challenges, in 2007 the City University of New York (CUNY) developed the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), a comprehensive three-year program that provides academic, personal, and financial support to students with families that have low incomes. A randomized controlled trial of CUNY ASAP, evaluated by MDRC, found that the program increased three-year graduation rates by 18 percentage points.³ A later study of ASAP Ohio—a replication of ASAP at three community colleges in Ohio—found that the program increased graduation rates by 15 percentage points.⁴ These effects on college completion are the largest of any postsecondary program that has been evaluated by MDRC.⁵

In 2018, with technical assistance from CUNY, Westchester Community College of the State University of New York system (SUNY Westchester) launched a student support program that was modeled closely on CUNY's

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ASAP program: Viking Resources for Obtaining Associate Degrees and Success (Viking ROADS). Despite the fact that the evaluation of the program coincided largely with the COVID-19 pandemic, early findings indicated that it had positive effects on enrollment and credit attainment.⁶ This final report presents three-year findings from MDRC's evaluation of Viking ROADS, which continues to have positive effects on academic progress and, ultimately, large effects on degree completion.

About the Viking ROADS Program

With financial support from Arnold Ventures, CUNY provided SUNY Westchester with technical assistance to launch Viking ROADS in 2018. The initial technical assistance comprised in-person site visits at CUNY colleges, detailed training sessions on the various aspects of the ASAP model (including advising, data collection and analysis, staffing, recruitment, delivery of financial support, academic momentum, and cross-college collaboration), access to a curated resource library, and monthly consultation visits to campus and calls during the planning and early implementation phases. After the program was launched, the CUNY ASAP replication team reviewed data every month and semester with Viking ROADS staff members to help tailor and refine their program. Once implemented, Vikings ROADS completed a fidelity-to-model assessment on an annual basis that was designed to measure how closely the program followed the ASAP model and to document adaptations. The Viking ROADS staff also received continuous support and engagement via the CUNY ASAP-hosted National Replication Collaborative, a knowledge network of higher education practitioners that is dedicated to accelerating structural change and improving outcomes for institutions and students.

Program Components

Based on the CUNY ASAP model, Viking ROADS comprises a comprehensive, integrated, three-year package:

- **Student support:** Students have access to a dedicated academic counselor, tutoring services, career services, and a summer program orientation.
- **Financial support:** Students receive a scholarship that covers the gap between grant aid and tuition and fees, a monthly transportation voucher, and an annual textbook stipend of \$500.
- **Specialized course enrollment:** Specialized enrollment options include reserved seats in select first-year courses.

To receive these benefits, Viking ROADS students had to enroll in classes full time, enroll in their required developmental courses within their first year, meet with the Vikings ROADS counselor monthly, and use support services monthly.

Program Eligibility Criteria

Similar to the eligibility criteria of CUNY ASAP, Viking Roads students were required to be

- New York residents,
- first-time college-goers or transfer students with no more than 18 credits and a college grade point average of 2.0 or higher,
- enrolled in an eligible major,⁷
- willing to enroll full time, and
- no more than one level below college-level courses in up to two subject areas — in other words, students could be recommended for no more than two developmental education courses at the time of study intake.

About the Viking ROADS Evaluation

MDRC's evaluation of Viking ROADS is designed to determine the impact of the program on student academic progress and completion compared with the college's regular programs and services. At the three-year mark, the confirmatory outcome of academic performance is the graduation rate, which is defined as having earned any degree or certificate at any college.⁸

Research Design

To estimate the effect of Viking ROADS compared with SUNY Westchester's usual services, this evaluation used a randomized controlled trial research design. Eligible and consenting students were randomly assigned into two groups for comparison. Half of these students were assigned to the program group, whose members were eligible to participate in the Viking ROADS program and could access other existing SUNY Westchester services. The other half were assigned to the control group, whose members were not eligible for Viking ROADS but could use all other existing services at the college. In all, 574 students were enrolled in three cohorts — fall 2019, fall 2020, and spring 2021 — and followed for three years.

Data Sources

The evaluation of Viking ROADS relies on several data sources:

- **Baseline survey:** Before random assignment, students filled out a baseline information form to collect basic demographic and background information. This information is used to describe the

sample and document that the program and control group members were similar at the outset of the study.

- **Transcripts:** Measures of academic outcomes were obtained from detailed college records that were provided to MDRC by SUNY Westchester.
- **National Student Clearinghouse:** Data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse, which collects student enrollment and degree data for nearly all postsecondary institutions in the United States, were used to further evaluate and confirm academic outcomes such as enrollment and graduation rates.⁹

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Much of the study took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have implications for the study findings. Students who began the study in fall 2019, before the pandemic began, were required to adapt to remote learning after one semester. Students who started in fall 2020 and spring 2021 joined the study when classes and student support were available almost exclusively online. In-person classes did not resume at SUNY Westchester until fall 2021 and, even after in-person classes were available, most students continued to opt for online classes. (Some of these courses were live or real-time online courses, while others were fully asynchronous.) The pandemic also caused the program to shift support services from in-person to virtual, with meetings between students and counselors occurring via Zoom, phone calls, email, or text messages. By fall 2021, program services were available in a range of in-person and virtual modes.

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

Table 1 presents select baseline characteristics of the study sample members by research group. For a full set of baseline characteristics, see Supplementary Table S.1.

Most of the students in the study sample are considered traditional college students: About 78 percent are 19 years old or younger, about 95 percent have a high school diploma, 88 percent live with their parents, and only about 7 percent have children. Approximately 20 percent of the Viking ROADS study sample is considered “nontraditional,” which is defined as students who are over the age of 24, work full time, have children, or do not have a high school diploma (having received a GED or other high school equivalency instead).

Interestingly, compared with the fall 2019 cohort, students enrolled in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 cohorts were more likely to be older, first-generation college attendees, recipients of a GED certificate, Black, women, parents, and living away from home. The share of nontraditional students in Cohort 1 (fall 2019) was 14 percent, whereas the share of nontraditional students in Cohort 2 (fall 2020) and Cohort 3 (spring 2021) was 26 percent. Several factors may have driven this increase in nontraditional students, including the impact of the pandemic on students’ available time and

Table 1 Select Baseline Characteristics

Characteristic (%)	Program Group	Control Group	Difference	Standard Error	P-Value
Gender					
Female	45.8	46.5	-0.7	4.2	0.873
Male	53.5	53.1	0.3	4.2	0.938
Nonbinary	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.6	0.568
Age					
19 years or younger	77.4	77.6	-0.2	3.5	0.956
20 to 23 years	10.8	12.9	-2.2	2.7	0.422
24 years or older	11.8	9.4	2.4	2.6	0.360
Race/ethnicity					
Hispanic ^a	52.1	55.9	-3.8	4.2	0.369
White	18.9	21.4	-2.5	3.4	0.465
Black	19.2	16.4	2.9	3.2	0.375
Asian	5.2	2.5	2.8 *	1.6	0.089
More than one race	4.2	2.1	2.1	1.5	0.162
Other ^b	0.3	1.8	-1.4 *	0.9	0.099
Lives with parents	88.0	87.6	0.4	2.8	0.898
Has children	8.7	4.6	4.2**	2.1	0.047
Currently employed	54.2	52.5	1.7	4.2	0.686
Earned a high school diploma	95.3	95.3	0.0	1.8	0.992
Nontraditional ^c	21.9	17.5	4.3	3.3	0.194
Sample size (total = 574)	288	286			

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using baseline information form data.

NOTES: Distributions may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

Statistical testing suggests that the baseline characteristics of the program and control group students that are shown above do not differ from one another.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

^aRespondents who said they were Hispanic and chose a race are included only in the "Hispanic" category.

^bThe "Other" category includes students who wrote in other races and ethnicities.

^cNontraditional students are defined as those who were 24 years or older, worked 35 or more hours per week, had children, or had not received a high school diploma and were not enrolled in high school at the time of random assignment. Students are listed as nontraditional if they fit any of these characteristics. Students are considered to have missing data in the "Nontraditional" category if they were missing data on two or more of these variables and have no other nontraditional characteristic; however, since less than 6 percent of the study sample is missing data, this percentage is not listed in the table.

employment or the shift to virtual courses, which made it easier for some people to attend college. Supplementary Table S.2 presents these findings in more detail.

The Effects of Viking ROADS on Academic Outcomes

This brief builds upon the large positive effects on academic progress (enrollment and credit attainment) that were seen one-and-a-half years after random assignment.¹⁰

The updated findings show that Viking ROADS led to a 12 percentage point increase in graduation rates after three years, demonstrating the sustained impact of the intervention. The following sections examine the key steps along the path to this striking outcome.

Effects on Enrollment

Figure 1 presents data on college enrollment in the six semesters after students joined the study.¹¹ Enrollment for both research groups dropped steadily over the semesters, as students either left school or earned degrees.

The figure shows that the program group had consistently higher enrollment rates than the control group in the first four semesters, with large and statistically significant impacts in the first three semesters. In Semester 3, for example, 73.9 percent of program group students were enrolled at SUNY Westchester compared with 65.8 percent of control group students, for an estimated effect of 8.2 percentage points. The estimated effect in Semester 4 is 5.1 percentage points. Though not statistically significant, effects of this magnitude are relatively large compared with the effects produced by many college interventions.¹² The positive effect on enrollment is encouraging and indicates that the support provided by Viking ROADS kept many students enrolled when they would have dropped out in the absence of the program. By Semester 5 and Semester 6, the effect drops to nearly zero as students begin to graduate – the absence of strong negative effects is a promising sign that the control group was not starting to “catch up” to the program group.

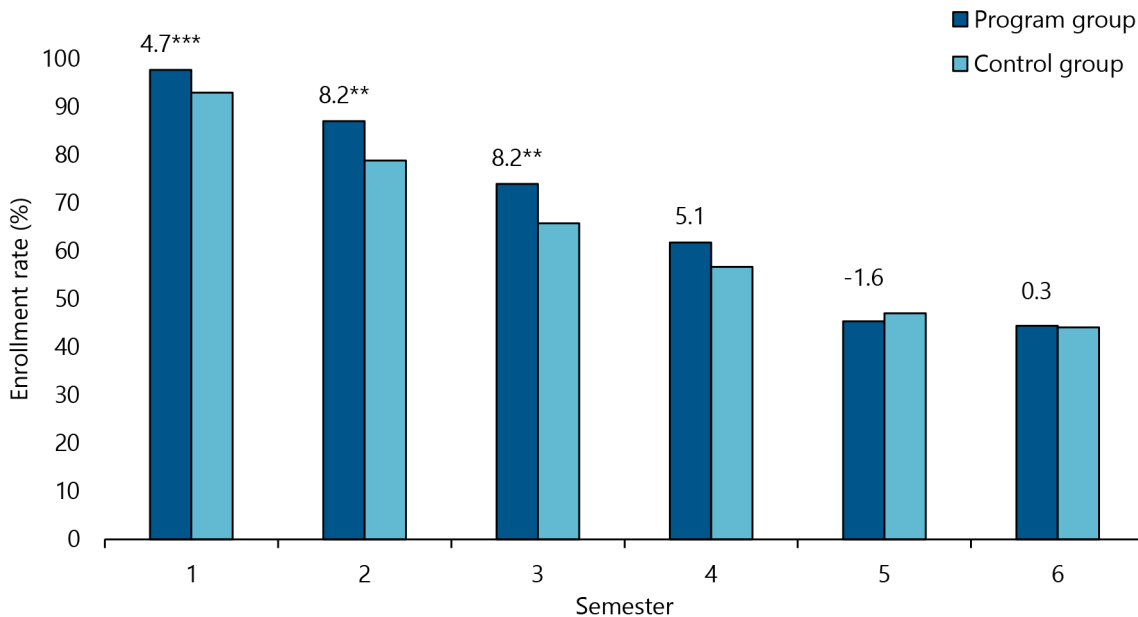
There is also a notable large effect on full-time enrollment throughout the first four semesters, ranging from 6.9 to 18.2 percentage points (shown in Supplementary Table S.3).

Effects on Credit Attainment

The higher enrollment rates and full-time enrollment rates among program group members led to increased credit accumulation, giving program group students the chance to earn more credits than their control group peers. Figure 2 presents data on the credits students earned; for more detailed findings, see Supplementary Table S.3.

The program group quickly outpaced the control group in average credit accumulation at SUNY Westchester and maintained its lead throughout the follow-up period. By the end of the third semes-

Figure 1 Effects on College Enrollment



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using transcript data from SUNY Westchester Community College and enrollment records from the National Student Clearinghouse.

NOTES: Enrollment is based on all available data and includes all enrollment statuses.

Estimates are adjusted by enrollment plans prior to learning about Viking ROADS (intent to enroll part time or full time), parental status, marital status, full-time employment, high school diploma receipt, status as a first-generation college student (operationalized as first person in family to attend college), financial independence (operationalized as parents paying less than half of living expenses), and cohort (semester student joined the study).

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

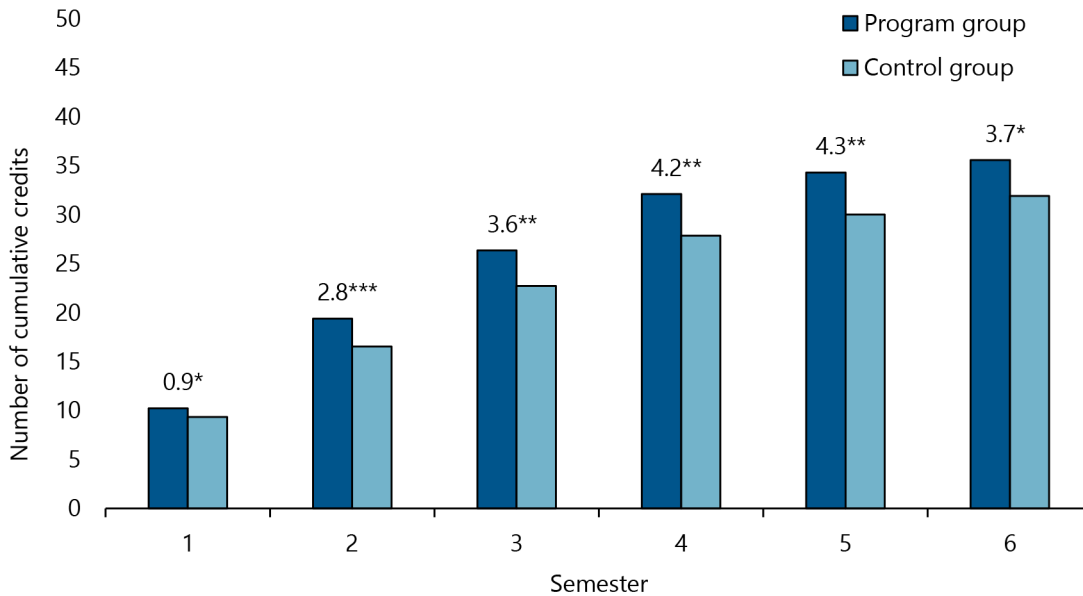
Total sample size is 574 (program group = 288, control group = 286).

ter, the program group had earned an additional 3.6 credits, on average, compared with the control group. This difference increases slightly in Semester 4 and Semester 5 before tapering off in the final semester. The sustained impact in credit accumulation translates into higher degree completion rates for the program group, as discussed next.

Effects on Credential Attainment

Figure 3 presents data on credential attainment for study participants; for more detailed information, including p-values and statistical significance levels, see Supplementary Table S.3.¹³ Only one student’s highest credential was a certificate, so this figure primarily reflects the attainment of an associate degree. The figure shows that the program’s positive impact on credential receipt grew over three years, culminating in an 11.8 percentage point effect.

Figure 2 Effects on Cumulative Credits Earned



SOURCE: MDRC calculations using transcript data from SUNY Westchester Community College.

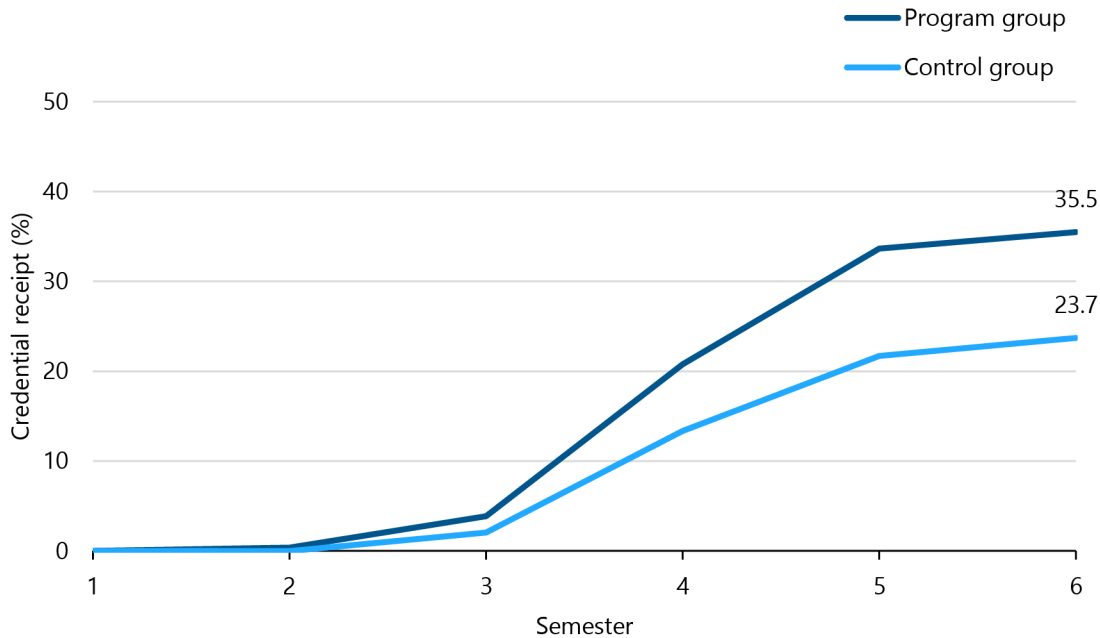
NOTES: Estimates are adjusted by enrollment plans prior to learning about Viking ROADS (intent to enroll part time or full time), parental status, marital status, full-time employment, high school diploma receipt, status as a first-generation college student (operationalized as first person in family to attend college), financial independence (operationalized as parents paying less than half of living expenses), and cohort (semester student joined the study).

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Total sample size is 574 (program group = 288, control group = 286).

By Semester 4, 20.8 percent of program group students had earned degrees compared with 13.3 percent of control group students, for an estimated impact on degree attainment of 7.4 percentage points. By Semester 6 the estimated effect on degree completion had grown to 11.8 percentage points, with 35.5 percent of the program group earning a degree and 23.7 percent of the control group earning a degree.

Although the effect of Viking ROADS on three-year graduation rates is 11.8 percentage points, its effect on earning 60 or more credits – the number of credits typically required to earn a degree – is only 4.4 percentage points (see Supplementary Table S.5). A similar pattern was observed in the CUNY ASAP evaluation.¹⁴ While data limitations may explain a small part of this difference, there are several possible explanations related to the program itself.

Figure 3 Effects on Credential Attainment

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using data from the National Student Clearinghouse and transcript data from SUNY Westchester Community College.

NOTES: Estimates are adjusted by enrollment plans prior to learning about Viking ROADS (intent to enroll part time or full time), parental status, marital status, full-time employment, high school diploma receipt, status as a first-generation college student (operationalized as first person in family to attend college), financial independence (operationalized as parents paying less than half of living expenses), and cohort (semester student joined the study).

The significant impact on credit attainment in Semester 6 is 11.8 percentage points.

Total sample size is 574 (program group = 288, control group = 286).

First, the intensive academic advising and specialized course enrollment options that were offered by Viking ROADS may have helped students be more efficient in their course-taking decisions. Students must earn 60 credits *and* meet specific degree requirements. The Viking ROADS program services may have helped students choose and get into the right courses to meet these requirements, avoiding excess credits. Beyond choosing the right courses, switching majors can also result in excess credits. If the Viking ROADS program affected how often and when students change their majors, it could affect their number of excess credits.

Second, Viking ROADS may have helped students who completed degree requirements take the final steps necessary to make their degree official (like completing forms and paperwork). Among students who earned 60 or more credits, only 69.8 percent of control group students earned a degree compared with 83.8 percent of the program group, a 14 percentage point difference. This

is striking, even if the exact mechanism cannot be determined from the available data: The Viking ROADS program may be helping students earn more degrees and spend less time and money doing so.

While the success of Viking ROADS is exceptional, especially when considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also worth noting that nearly 65 percent of students who were offered Viking ROADS and its unusually comprehensive set of support services had not earned a degree three years after entering the program. Although this still marks a substantial improvement from the 76 percent of control group students who had not earned a degree, it highlights the need to continue exploring ways to help students reach graduation.

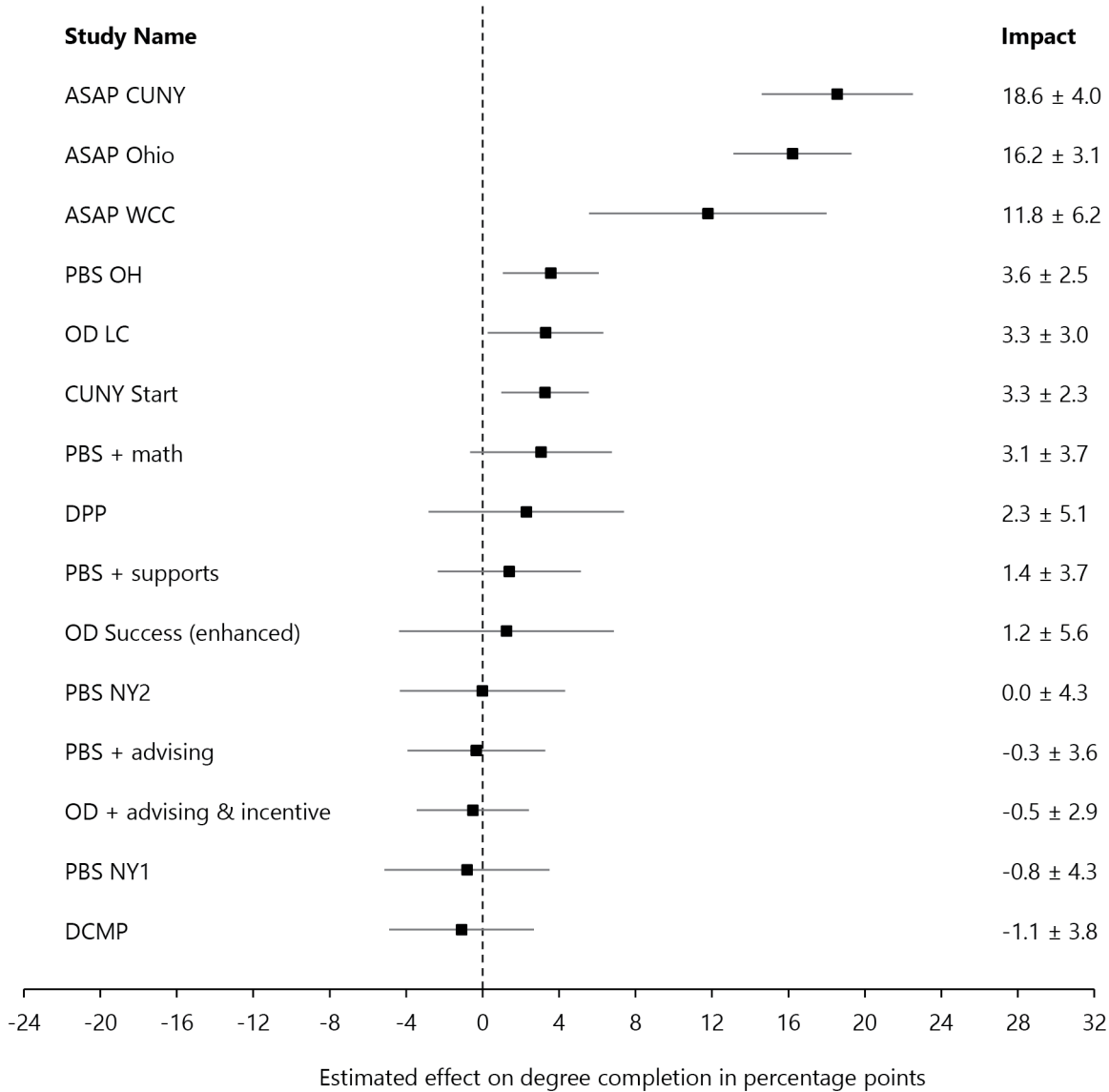
Comparing ASAP with Prior Evaluations

In addition to the main findings, the study also assessed how the impact of Viking ROADS on degree receipt compares with the impacts of CUNY ASAP, ASAP Ohio, and other programs MDRC has evaluated over the last 20 years. Because of the program's small sample size, this analysis is imprecise and exploratory, meaning that any findings should be viewed as suggestive only.

It is of great interest to researchers whether CUNY's ASAP model can achieve similar results in different contexts. Viking ROADS increased degree receipt by an estimated 12 percentage points at the end of Semester 6 compared with an estimated 16 percentage points for the ASAP Ohio programs and 19 percentage points for CUNY ASAP.¹⁵ To reiterate, only Viking ROADS was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed extraordinary challenges to institutions of higher learning across the world. Despite facing disruptions from remote learning, campus closures, reduced access to support services, and the delay of a full return to in-person instruction until fall 2023, Viking ROADS demonstrates comparable success to its counterparts. A 12 percentage point effect estimate is large compared with what has been observed in past randomized controlled trial evaluations of college interventions. For example, MDRC has used randomized controlled trials to evaluate 20 other college interventions that tracked students' three-year graduation rates. Among those previous evaluations, only two studies saw estimated effects on three-year degree completion that were larger than 12 percentage points, and those were studies of CUNY ASAP and its replication in Ohio (see Figure 4).¹⁶

The prominence of ASAP's success — with impacts in distinct locations — emphasizes the robustness of the model. The Viking ROADS results represent a continuation of these large, positive effects, and reinforce the program's potential to achieve substantial improvements in degree completion, even in varied settings with unprecedented implementation challenges like the ones that were posed during the pandemic. The consistency of ASAP's success in multiple studies highlights the model's replicability and underscores its effectiveness in boosting graduation rates.

Figure 4 Graduation Impacts After Three Years, by Program



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using data from SUNY Westchester Community College and Michael J. Weiss, Howard S. Bloom, and Kriti Singh, "What 20 Years of MDRC RCTs Suggest About Predictive Relationships Between Intervention Features and Intervention Impacts for Community College Students," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 45, 4 (2023): 569–597.

NOTES: Confidence intervals are 90 percent.
 The small sample size leads to a wider confidence interval for ASAP Westchester Community College.
 All studies have a sample size of at least 400.
 Some studies have slightly different definitions of degree completion in Semester 6.
 Please refer to Supplementary Table S.6 for full program names and references.

Conclusion

The three-year findings reveal that the Viking ROADS comprehensive package of services and support led to significant increases in enrollment, full-time enrollment, credit attainment, and — ultimately — degree completion at SUNY Westchester. By the end of the sixth semester, the program group showed a 12 percentage point increase in credential attainment over the control group.

Despite the challenges that were posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Viking ROADS still had large effects on three-year graduation rates, confirming the strength and adaptability of the ASAP model. Viking ROADS not only helped students navigate the immediate disruptions that were caused by the pandemic but also supported their continued academic progress and degree attainment.

Guided by the evidence, in 2024 the SUNY system began expanding the program to over 4,000 students in 25 more of its campuses statewide, serving students who seek associate degrees and bachelor's degrees. This expansion reflects an increasing recognition of the model's impact. The CUNY ASAP replication team provided technical assistance and consultation for the expansion to support high-fidelity replication in the colleges implementing the model. In addition, the Viking ROADS team and SUNY Westchester leaders were able to share their experiences from implementing within the SUNY context and provide nuanced guidance to their colleagues. Preliminary data from this expansion effort is promising and shows that students who enrolled in these programs are — yet again — more likely to remain in school and complete college credits.¹⁷

As Viking ROADS continues to evolve, this report's findings add to the growing body of evidence supporting the program's ability to enhance academic outcomes for community college students. MDRC is conducting several evaluations to broaden the ASAP model's evidence base: an ongoing evaluation of a part-time adaptation of the ASAP model at Lorain County Community College, a long-term follow-up study examining the academic and labor market impacts of the first ASAP replication at three community colleges in Ohio, and a new study that will examine the labor market impacts of the original CUNY ASAP evaluation for the first time.¹⁸ The ASAP model's sustained impacts highlight the crucial role of comprehensive support programs in helping students overcome educational barriers and stay on track to achieving their academic goals.

Notes and References

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- 7 SUNY Westchester Community College, “Viking ROADS” (website: <https://www.sunywcc.edu/student-services/opportunity-programs/viking-roads/>, 2024).
- 8 A confirmatory outcome is one that is believed to be a main indicator of the success of Viking ROADS. While the confirmatory outcome is defined as earning any degree or certificate, only a single study participant’s highest credential was a certificate.
- 9 For further information regarding data sources, please refer to the analysis plan: Rebekah O’Donoghue, Colleen Sommo, Michael Weiss, Emily Brennan, and Stanley Dai, “Westchester ASAP Replication Analysis Plan” (MDRC, 2019), website: <https://osf.io/53jq2/>.
- 10 Dai, Sommo, and O’Donoghue (2022).

- 11 Figure 1 combines part-time and full-time enrollment.
- 12 Weiss, Somers, and Hill (2023).
- 13 Credential attainment includes both degree and certificate attainment.
- 14 Scrivener et al. (2015).
- 15 While the three effect estimates vary, statistical testing indicates they do not vary more than would be expected by chance if the true effects were the same across studies.
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