

CASE STUDIES

Proof in Practice



How a College Ditched Outdated Metrics and Doubled Throughput

Rethinking what success looks like.

CONTEXT

Colleges worldwide face a persistent problem: students start strong but struggle to finish. Completion rates stagnate even when funding, programs, and technology improve. For many institutions, the challenge isn't the students' potential, it's how success is measured and supported. The City University of New York (CUNY) confronted this head-on through its Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative, later adapted by several U.S. states and studied by Canadian education leaders for its focus on student throughput rather than static completion metrics. The program demonstrated that when institutions measure and support progress velocity, how many students advance on time, rather than traditional performance indicators like seat hours or class completions, outcomes can transform dramatically.

THE CHALLENGE

CUNY's two-year colleges were enrolling thousands of students each term, but graduation rates were stubbornly low. By 2007, only 22% of students were completing associate degrees within three years. Traditional performance indicators like "courses offered," "students retained," or "credits attempted" tracked activity, but not whether students were finishing programs efficiently. Faculty and administrators realized that their existing metrics rewarded effort, not progress. Meanwhile, barriers such as financial stress, scheduling conflicts, and limited advising capacity slowed student advancement.

"We were measuring how busy we were, not how far students were getting."

— Academic Dean, CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College

APPROACH

1. Redefining Success

ASAP redefined the goal: not just retention, but on-time completion. The institution stopped celebrating enrolment and instead focused on outcomes that mattered to students and communities, degrees completed, transfer readiness, and career alignment.

2. Comprehensive Student Support

Each student received a structured support package:

- Dedicated advisors with small caseloads (1:150 vs. 1:600 typical).
- Financial assistance for transportation, textbooks, and tuition gaps.
- Block scheduling and required full-time enrolment to maintain momentum.
- Peer learning communities for belonging and accountability.

3. Data-Driven Coaching

ASAP used data dashboards to track student progress weekly, flagging risks like missed classes or incomplete assignments. Advisors intervened early, turning reactive advising into proactive coaching.

4. Scaling and Replicating

The program's success led to expansion across nine campuses, later replicated in Ohio, California, and Manitoba pilot projects exploring throughput-based success models.

RESULTS

The results were transformative.

- Graduation rates doubled — from 22% to 52% within three years.
- Per-graduate cost decreased by 11% despite higher per-student investment.
- Students earned an average of 10 more credits than peers in traditional programs.
- Full-time enrolment persistence increased to 86%.

A 2020 independent evaluation by MDRC confirmed ASAP's long-term impact: students continued to outperform peers even after transferring to four-year institutions.

"We stopped asking, 'Why can't students finish?' and started asking, 'What can we remove so they can?'"

— CUNY ASAP Director

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Measure what matters most.

Counting enrolment or credit attempts doesn't show value, completion does.

2. Design for velocity, not volume.

Systems that move students efficiently through programs improve both outcomes and costs.

3. Support is strategy.

Advising, scheduling, and financial stability are productivity enablers, not extras.

4. Data + humanity = results.

Real-time data empowered staff to act early, but human relationships sustained momentum.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Audit your metrics: Do they measure output or impact?
- Align funding incentives with on-time completion and progression.
- Give advisors data dashboards and manageable caseloads.
- Remove administrative friction (timetables, payment schedules, paperwork).
- Tell success stories through student outcomes, not spreadsheets.

REFERENCES

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Share your thoughts, your examples

We are always looking forward to learn as a community.

solutions@productivitycouncil.ca