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OVERVIEW

Community colleges play a crucial role in the higher education system in the United States, serving millions of students each year at a lower cost than private two-year and public or private four-year institutions. Despite their affordability and broad access, community colleges face persistent student retention and degree completion challenges. The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is a comprehensive student support program that aims to address common barriers to degree completion by offering financial, academic, and personal assistance to help students graduate within three years. Rigorous evaluations have consistently shown that the program substantially increases three-year associate's degree completion rates. Due to its strong evidence base, ASAP has been replicated in nine states.

This report revisits the 2010 evaluation of ASAP to assess its long-term impacts over a 14-year period. The focus is on educational attainment and, for the first time, labor market outcomes in New York State. ASAP is explicitly a degree completion program—it is not a workforce development program. Nonetheless, a potential indirect consequence of achieving its direct goal of increased degree completion is improved labor market outcomes. Recent research has begun to explore the program's long-term labor market effects, with a study of programs modeled after ASAP in Ohio showing gains in earnings several years after enrollment. By extending the follow-up period of the study, the present analyses provide insights into the durability of ASAP's degree impacts and its potential to improve economic mobility in multiple settings.

ASAP substantially increased rates of degree completion. Fourteen years after students first joined the evaluation, 57.7 percent of those offered ASAP earned a degree, compared with 50.0 percent of the students who were not offered ASAP. This represents an estimated effect of 7.7 percentage points, which is large and statistically significant. Despite the large positive effects on degree completion, ASAP did not produce a statistically discernible impact on annual earnings in New York State. In the last two years of available follow-up data, those offered ASAP earned approximately $36,000 per year, compared with some $38,000 per year for their control group counterparts. This represents an estimated effect of -$2,011, which is not statistically significant.

The degree completion findings reinforce the robust evidence base demonstrating that ASAP is a powerful model for increasing degree completion, and that this effect is very long lasting at CUNY. The labor market findings in Ohio show that ASAP can have positive effects on long-term earnings, but the findings in CUNY show that these effects are not a foregone conclusion, even when effects on degree completion are impressive. Together, the findings raise questions about how and under what conditions postsecondary completion programs translate academic success into economic gains. A forthcoming report will incorporate labor market outcomes beyond New York State and synthesize the New York and Ohio results, potentially shedding further light on these questions.

As more colleges adopt and adapt ASAP, it will be important to understand how program design, institutional context, and local labor market conditions interact to shape long-term success. This study contributes a critical piece to that broader evidence base and points to the need for ongoing inquiry into how best to support students not only through college, but into meaningful and rewarding careers.

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The Authors

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges play a crucial role in the higher education system in the United States, serving millions of students each year at a lower cost than private two-year institutions and public or private four-year institutions.[1] Community colleges provide an accessible pathway to higher education, particularly for first-generation college students, working adults, and students from low-income backgrounds. Despite their affordability and broad access, community colleges face persistent student-retention and degree-completion challenges. Nationally, around 43 percent of community college students earn a degree within six years, with many students struggling to navigate academic requirements, financial burdens, and competing life responsibilities.[2] Addressing these impediments to success is critical to improving student outcomes and advancing economic mobility.

The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is a comprehensive student support program designed to help more students graduate with an associate's degree and to graduate more quickly. Launched by CUNY in 2007, ASAP requires students to attend full time and provides them with intensive advising, tutoring, and career development services; tuition gap coverage; free textbooks; and transportation assistance.[3] The program aims to address common barriers to degree completion by offering students financial, academic, and personal support to help them graduate within three years. Since its inception, ASAP has served over 100,000 students across CUNY's community colleges and has been recognized as one of the most effective college completion programs in the nation. See Box 1 for details on ASAP's career development support services, which have evolved since the beginning of the program.

ASAP has demonstrated large and lasting impacts on student success. Rigorous evaluations, including multiple randomized controlled trials, have consistently shown that the program substantially increases three-year associate's degree completion rates.[4] Due to its strong evidence base, ASAP has been replicated in nine states.[5]

ASAP is explicitly a degree completion program—it is not a workforce development program. Nonetheless, a potential indirect consequence of achieving its direct goal of increased degree completion is improved labor market outcomes. In fact, recent research has begun to explore the program's long-term labor market effects, with a study of programs modeled after ASAP in Ohio showing gains in earnings six to eight years after enrollment.[6]

1. College Board (2025).
2. Lee and Shapiro (2023).
3. For a detailed discussion of the program model, its implementation and service contrast, see Scrivener et al. (2015).
4. Weiss, Ratledge, Sommo, and Gupta (2019); Miller and Weiss (2021); Dai, Warner, and Sommo (2025).
5. ASAP has been replicated at institutions in California, Colorado, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia.
6. Hill, Warner, and Sommo (2025).

BOX 1

ASAP's Evolving Career Development Support Structure

ASAP's career development model has evolved since its early cohorts (2007–2014) and the program's expansion from 4,000 students in 2015 to 25,000 students annually. During the MDRC-led randomized controlled trial (from 2009 through 2012), each college had a dedicated Career and Employment Specialist who met with students once per semester to support career goals and provide job assistance.

Today, each college still has one dedicated Career Specialist who collaborates with advisers to guide career exploration, skill development, and connections to internships, jobs, and networking opportunities. Students must now also complete one career activity and two career exposure opportunities each semester, aligned with the Career Readiness Competencies identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. This integrated model aims to ensure students refine their career goals while aligning them with their immediate and long-term academic plans.

This report revisits the 2010 evaluation of ASAP in CUNY — the first randomized controlled trial of the program — to assess its long-term impacts over a 14-year period. The focus is on educational attainment and, for the first time, labor market outcomes in New York State. These analyses complement the recent findings from Ohio. By extending the follow-up period, the present analyses provide insight into the durability of ASAP's degree impacts and its potential to improve economic mobility in multiple settings. A future report will synthesize the findings from the studies of ASAP in CUNY and Ohio and will also include out-of-state labor market data for a more comprehensive assessment of ASAP's effects on employment and earnings.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH FINDINGS

Multiple randomized controlled trials have demonstrated that CUNY ASAP substantially improves college graduation rates, as shown in Table 1.

MDRC conducted the original randomized controlled trial of ASAP at three CUNY community colleges. The study included 896 students and found that the program increased three-year associate's degree completion rates by 18 percentage points compared with standard community college services. Longer-term follow-up data showed that a good proportion of these gains persisted over time, with a 12 percentage point increase on earning an associate's degree eight years after joining the study.[7]

7. Azurdia and Galkin (2020).

Table 1. Previous Randomized Controlled Trials of ASAP

Evaluation	Evaluation Launch	Sample Size		Program Type	Effect on Degree Completion	
		Students	Colleges		3-Year	Longer Term
CUNY ASAP	2010	896	3	Associate's	18 pp	12 pp
Ohio Replication	2015	1,501	3	Associate's	16 pp	15 pp
SUNY Replication	2019	574	1	Associate's	12 pp	Not available
CUNY ACE	2015	570	1	Bachelor's	Not applicable	12 pp

SOURCES: Previous evaluation reports: Scrivener et al. (2015); Hill, Warner, and Sommo (2025); Dai, Warner, and Sommo (2025); Scuello and Strumbos (2024).

NOTES: CUNY = City University of New York. ASAP = Accelerated Study in Associate Programs. SUNY = State University of New York. ACE = Accelerate, Complete, and Engage. PP = percentage points. Longer term refers to eight years for CUNY ASAP and the Ohio Replication and five years for CUNY ACE. Degree outcomes are defined differently across studies: CUNY = associate's degrees; Ohio = any degree type; SUNY = any credential; ACE = bachelor's degrees.

The success of ASAP in CUNY's community colleges led to replication efforts in other contexts, including in Ohio and Westchester County, New York. In Ohio, three community colleges implemented programs modeled after ASAP, with technical assistance from CUNY and minor contextual adaptations of the model. An MDRC-led randomized controlled trial including 1,501 students found that the program increased three-year graduation rates by 16 percentage points. Follow-up analyses revealed that these gains extended eight years after enrollment, including positive effects on bachelor's degree attainment. Additionally, students who were offered the program experienced 12 percent higher earnings six years after enrollment and 14 percent higher earnings eight years after enrollment, providing the first evidence that ASAP can have positive labor market benefits.[8]

Another replication and experimental evaluation including 574 students at Westchester Community College, part of the State University of New York system, which operates separately from CUNY, provided additional corroborating evidence of ASAP's effectiveness. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Westchester program achieved an estimated 12 percentage point impact on three-year degree attainment rates. This success during a period of significant disruption demonstrates the resilience of the ASAP model to varying situations.[9]

Finally, in fall 2015 CUNY launched a pilot program called Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. CUNY's ACE program was modeled after ASAP and adapted for the four-year college context. A 570-student evaluation of ACE,

8. Hill, Warner, and Sommo (2025).
9. Dai, Warner, and Sommo (2025).

led by Metis Associates, once again found large effects on degree completion — this time, a 12 percentage point increase on earning a bachelor's degree within four years of joining the program. This effect was maintained one year later.[10]

ASAP's large positive effects on degree completion at three CUNY community colleges, three Ohio community colleges, Westchester Community College, and at a four-year college within CUNY reinforce that this is a powerful proven model that is effective at increasing degree completion in various contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY

This section describes the study's research questions, data sources, and analytic approach.

Key Research Questions

This report examines the long-term impacts of CUNY ASAP on educational attainment and labor market outcomes. Specifically, it addresses the following primary research questions:

1. What is the long-term effect of ASAP on degree completion?

2. What is the long-term effect of ASAP on labor market outcomes in New York State?

Data Sources

Multiple administrative data sources are used to measure these outcomes.

- **Baseline survey**

Conducted just before random assignment, the baseline survey collected information primarily on student demographics.

- **CUNY Institutional Research Database**

The CUNY Institutional Research Database provides enrollment and degree attainment data within CUNY.

- **National Student Clearinghouse**

The National Student Clearinghouse captures enrollment and degree attainment data from colleges nationwide, allowing for comprehensive measures of educational progress and completion.

10. Scuello and Strumbos (2024).

- **New York State unemployment insurance records**

The state's Department of Labor tracks employment and earnings outcomes for individuals working in New York State.

New York State unemployment insurance data offer several important strengths for evaluating labor market outcomes. Because these records are based on employer-reported information for tax and insurance purposes, they provide highly accurate and reliable measures of employment and earnings. The data cover nearly all wage-paying and salaried jobs in New York State that are subject to unemployment insurance, including most private-sector, state, and local government employment, ensuring broad coverage of formal work. In addition, the administrative nature of the data allows for the longitudinal tracking of individuals over time, enabling the long-term analysis of employment and earnings trajectories rather than one-time snapshots. Finally, because participation is not voluntary, the dataset avoids issues of nonresponse or attrition.

There are, however, notable limitations to the New York State unemployment insurance data. First, this data source does not include employment or earnings outside of New York State, which is important given New York City's proximity to Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Future research will address this limitation by accessing unemployment insurance records from the surrounding states. Second, these records do not include information about the type or consistency of employment and therefore cannot be used to distinguish between full-time and part-time employment or permanent and contractual employment. Finally, these data exclude certain types of employment, including self-employment, federal government employment, military jobs, and informal jobs.[11]

Methodology

The analyses presented in this report are based on a 2010 randomized controlled trial of CUNY ASAP, in which eligible students were randomly assigned to either ASAP or a control group receiving standard college services. As a result, differences in outcomes between the two groups can be interpreted as estimates of the causal effect of ASAP on the students in the study. The study follows the analytic approach outlined in its preregistered preanalysis plan, which is publicly available in the Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies.[12] The analyses estimate the program's effects on degree completion, employment, and earnings 14 years after enrollment, providing the longest follow-up study on the impacts of CUNY ASAP.

11. New York State Department of Labor (2026).
12. Weiss et al. (2025).

KEY FINDINGS

CUNY ASAP substantially increased the percentage of students completing a degree. Fourteen years after students first joined the evaluation, 57.7 percent of those offered ASAP completed a degree, compared with 50.0 percent of the control group who were not offered ASAP. This finding represents an estimated effect of 7.7 percentage points, which is large and statistically significant (p = 0.022).[13]

Despite the large positive effects on degree completion, ASAP did not produce a statistically discernible impact on annual earnings in New York State. In the last two years of available follow-up data, those offered ASAP earned approximately $36,000 per year, compared with some $38,000 per year for their control group counterparts. This difference represents an estimated effect of -$2,011, which is not statistically significant (p = 0.480), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Findings: Primary Outcomes

	Program Group		Control Group					90% CI	
Measure	Sample Size	Mean	Sample Size	Mean	Estimated Effect	SE	P-Value	Lower	Upper
Earned a degree (%) (14 years)[a]	451	57.7	445	50.0	7.7	3.35	0.022	2.3	13.1
Average annual earnings ($) (11.5-13.5 years)[b]	449	36,038	437	38,049	-2,011	2,843	0.480	-6,571	2,549

SOURCES: Degree data obtained from the City University of New York's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment and National Student Clearinghouse. Earnings data obtained from the New York State unemployment insurance database.

NOTES: The primary outcomes were specified in a public preanalysis plan, see Weiss et al. (2025). CI = Confidence interval. SE = Standard error. Means are regression adjusted.

[a]Includes degrees earned at any college in the United States. The total randomized sample includes 903 students.

[b]Average annual earnings are in 2023 dollars and calculated from the last two years of available data, spanning the third quarter of Year 12 to the second quarter of Year 14.

The degree completion findings reinforce the robust evidence base demonstrating that ASAP is a powerful model for increasing degree completion. In the case of CUNY, the data show that ASAP has had a very long-lasting effect. The New York State labor market findings are somewhat puzzling, raising important questions about the long-term economic returns of

13. The p-value indicates the probability of finding the estimated effect (or larger) if an intervention was ineffective. An estimated effect that has a p-value of 10 percent or less is generally considered "statistically significant" because it is unlikely that an estimated effect that size or larger would be observed if the intervention was ineffective.

ASAP and the broader labor market contexts in which students pursue and complete a college degree. A subsequent report will incorporate labor market outcomes beyond New York State and may shed further light on these questions. The remainder of this section discusses these main findings in greater detail.

CUNY ASAP increased long-term degree completion.[14] The goal of ASAP is to get more students to graduate and to graduate more quickly. Figure 1 presents the rates of degree completion at any college (including two- and four-year degrees earned at CUNY or non-CUNY colleges) by research group, throughout the 14-year follow-up period. Differences between the two lines represent the estimated effect of CUNY ASAP on degree completion. By the end of the three-year program, program group members (the blue line) graduated at a rate of 39.5 percent and control group members (orange line) graduated at a rate of 22.4 percent, for an estimated effect of 17.1 percentage points (black line, $p < 0.001$).[15]

To put this finding in context, the estimated effect of ASAP on three-year graduation rates is the largest observed in over 30 randomized controlled trials that MDRC has conducted in higher education since 2003. This estimated effect is over three times larger than the estimated effect of any other program, excluding replications of ASAP.[16]

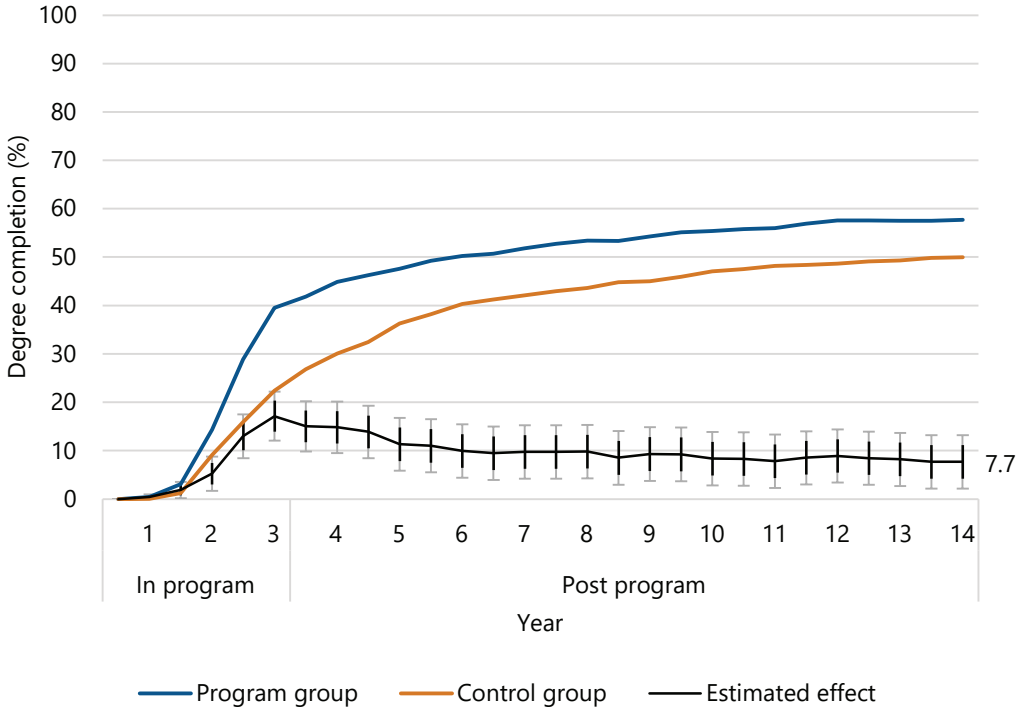
In the first three years following program completion (that is, Years 4 to 6 in Figure 1) the gap in graduation rates between program group members and control group members begins to narrow. After six years, ASAP's estimated effect on earning a degree was 10 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). Over the next eight years, the gap narrowed to just below 8 percentage points. The narrowing of the gap in post-program semesters implies that part of the 17 percentage point impact on three-year graduation rates was a result of ASAP getting students who would eventually graduate in the absence of ASAP to graduate more quickly because of ASAP. ASAP's remaining 7.7 percentage point impact on 14-year graduation rates likely reflects students who ASAP caused to graduate — that is, they would not have graduated without ASAP.

There is some evidence that ASAP helped some students (around 3 percent) earn bachelor's degrees more quickly than they otherwise would have. However, the program had no discernible long-term effect on bachelor's degree completion. (See the supplementary materials that are provided separately on the project page for this report.)

CUNY ASAP had no discernible effect on labor market outcomes in New York State. While ASAP's goal is to get students to complete an associate's degree and to do so quickly, an indirect effect of achieving this goal could be improved labor market outcomes. This indirect effect

14. Portions of this text are borrowed, with permission, from: https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/app.20170430.
15. The estimated effect differs slightly from that which was presented in past papers owing to the use of different covariates in the impact model.
16. Weiss, Somers, and Hill (2023).

Figure 1. Degree Completion (Any Type)



SOURCES: Data obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse and the City University of New York's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.

NOTES: Estimated effects are in percentage points. Black and grey error bars represent 70 and 90 percent confidence intervals, respectively (presented every other quarter). The x-axis labels are underneath the last quarter of the year. Group means are regression adjusted. Program and control group sample sizes are 451 and 445, respectively.

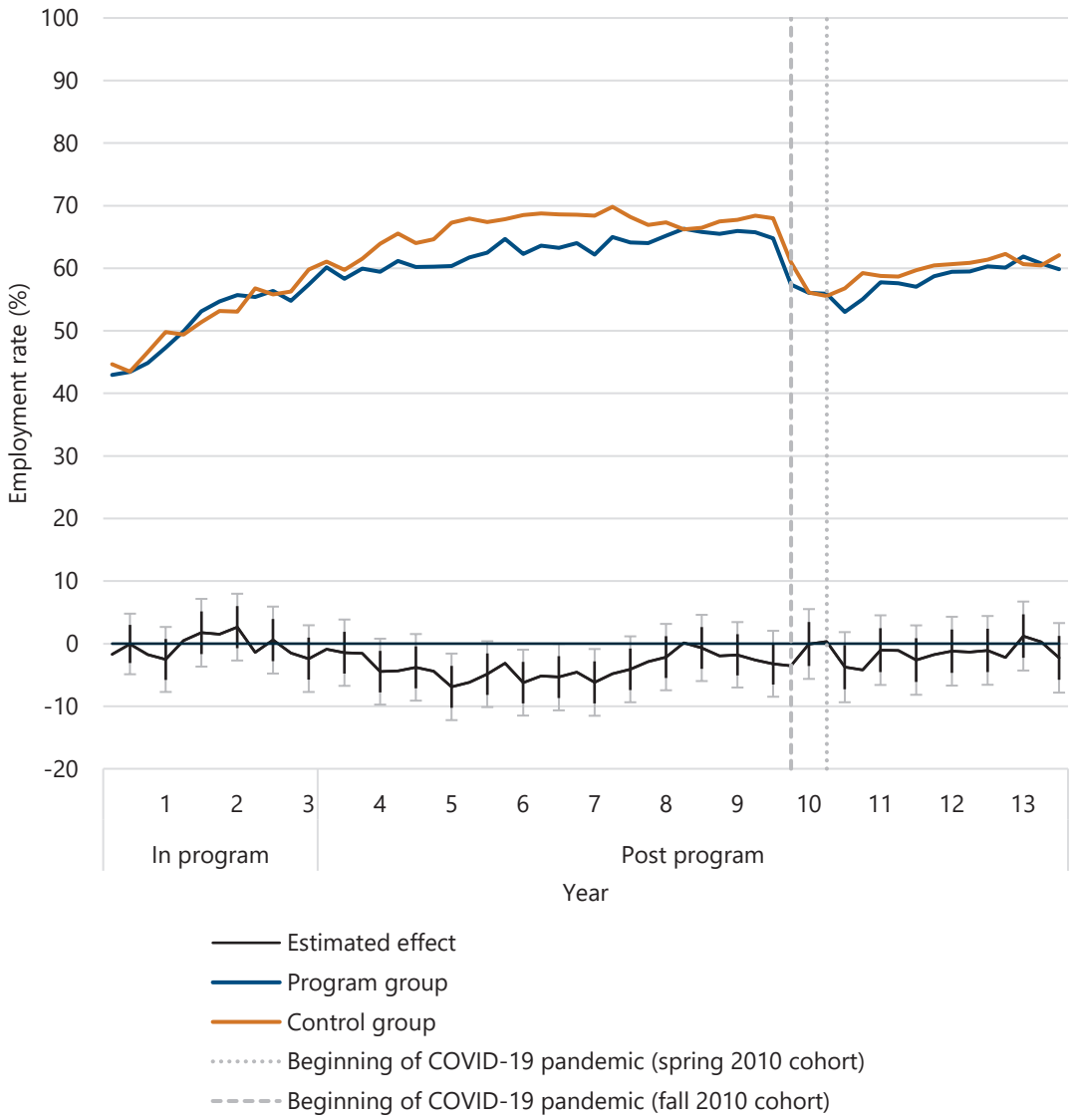
might be expected because there is broad evidence that those with a community college degree earn more than those without a degree. (This is true in the evaluation sample as well, see the supplementary materials for additional information.) Moreover, there is evidence that higher earnings are not just about the types of students who complete a degree, but also are about the labor market value of completing an associate's degree.[17] With respect to CUNY specifically, the earnings benefit of completing an associate's degree compared with completing some community college but not completing a degree, is estimated to be $2,500 to $3,500 per quarter, on average.[18] Thus, given ASAP's positive effects on degree completion, it seems plausible that the program could have an impact on labor market outcomes.

17. Lovenheim and Smith (2023).

18. Minaya, Scott-Clayton, and Thomas (2026).

Figure 2 displays quarterly employment rates in New York State, by research group. Generally, there is no evidence that ASAP improved employment in New York State. Most effect estimates on quarterly employment rates are negative, and they are mostly not statistically significant.

Figure 2. Quarterly Employment Rate in New York State



SOURCE: Data obtained from the New York State unemployment insurance database.

NOTES: Estimated effects are in percentage points. Black and grey error bars represent 70 percent and 90 percent confidence intervals, respectively (presented every other quarter). The x-axis labels are underneath the last quarter of the year. Group means are regression adjusted. Employment is defined as having any earnings reported to the New York State unemployment insurance system during the relevant quarter after random assignment. The vertical dashed lines mark Q1 2020 for each cohort, as this is when the COVID-19 pandemic began, causing dips in employment rates. Program and control group sample sizes are 449 and 437, respectively.

This pattern can be broken into time periods. First, consider the three-year period when program students were actively receiving ASAP services. During this time, the program substantially increased full-time enrollment and overall persistence.[19] Consequently, one might expect higher employment rates among control group students — who were more likely to have left school or be enrolled part time — as observed in the Ohio replication study.[20] However, during this time CUNY ASAP had no discernible effect on employment.

Between the start of Year 5 and the end of Year 7 there are indications that ASAP reduced rates of employment in New York State. The program group's quarterly employment rate during this period was, on average, 5.1 percentage points lower than that of the control group. One plausible explanation would be that more ASAP students were pursuing bachelor's degrees during this time. However, the data do not support this hypothesis: The program's effect on enrollment at a bachelor's degree-granting institution was zero in Year 5 and Year 7, and slightly negative in Year 6 as control group students caught up on bachelor's degree completion. The reason for these negative estimated effects on employment rates is unclear. By the middle of Year 8, employment rates between the two groups converge. Over the final five years of follow-up, there is no evidence that ASAP had any lasting impact on employment rates.

Next, it is important to consider the effects of CUNY ASAP on earnings. Some important context is necessary before diving into the findings: Across the literature, the average estimates of returns to associate's degrees are 13 percent (males) to 21 percent (females).[21] As outlined in this project's preanalysis plan, if ASAP influenced earnings solely through its impact on degree attainment, the expected effect on earnings would be approximately 1.0 percent to 3.6 percent — calculated as the program's 7.7 percentage point to 17.1 percentage point impact on degree completion (depending on the follow-up year) multiplied by the average estimated returns to an associate's degree for males and females. This context is important when interpreting the study's findings because the study sample size is not large enough to detect earnings effects of 1.0 percent to 3.6 percent with confidence. This limitation has been recognized in research literature for over a decade.[22]

Nonetheless, ASAP remains one of the few postsecondary interventions with large, replicated impacts on degree completion, and even fewer programs have the follow-up data necessary to assess labor market outcomes. In addition, it is plausible that a program like ASAP could impact labor market outcomes through mechanisms other than degree completion or timing. For these reasons, an examination of labor market outcomes is of interest.

The prespecified primary indicator of labor market success is average earnings during the final two years of observation. This outcome and timing were selected for several reasons.

19. Scrivener et al. (2015).
20. Hill, Warner, and Sommo (2025).
21. Belfield and Bailey (2017).
22. Weiss et al. (2015).

First, assessing labor market outcomes too early can be misleading. Early on many students were still enrolled in college and it's possible that the benefits of a degree might not yet offset the costs of delayed labor market entry. This concern is largely mitigated 13 to 14 years after program entry. Second, because students entered the study in their early 20s, on average, they remain in the early stages of their working lives even at the end of the present follow-up period.[23] As such, earnings in the final years of observation are likely to be the most informative of what longer-term labor market trajectories may be.

With that context, ASAP had an estimated effect of -$2,011 per year (a 5 percent reduction) on average earnings during the last two years of follow-up ($p = 0.480$). This result is not statistically significant and so one conclusion is that there is no discernible effect on earnings.

Figure 3 presents quarterly earnings in New York State by research group, covering nearly 14 years after study entry. The pattern of findings mirrors that of employment: there is no discernible effect on earnings. At the same time, in all but one quarter the estimated effects on earnings are negative, averaging a 9 percent reduction. Only a small number of these estimates are statistically significant.

While "earnings during the final two years of follow-up" was selected as the main indicator of labor market success, effects on cumulative earnings are also important to consider. Cumulatively, nearly 14 years after students joined the study, control group members earned approximately $30,000 more than those offered ASAP ($p = 0.068$). Figure 4 shows that ASAP's estimated effects on cumulative earnings are negative and statistically significant starting in Year 7 and through the end of the follow-up period. While this finding is exploratory, it is suggestive of a potential negative effect of the program with regard to earnings.

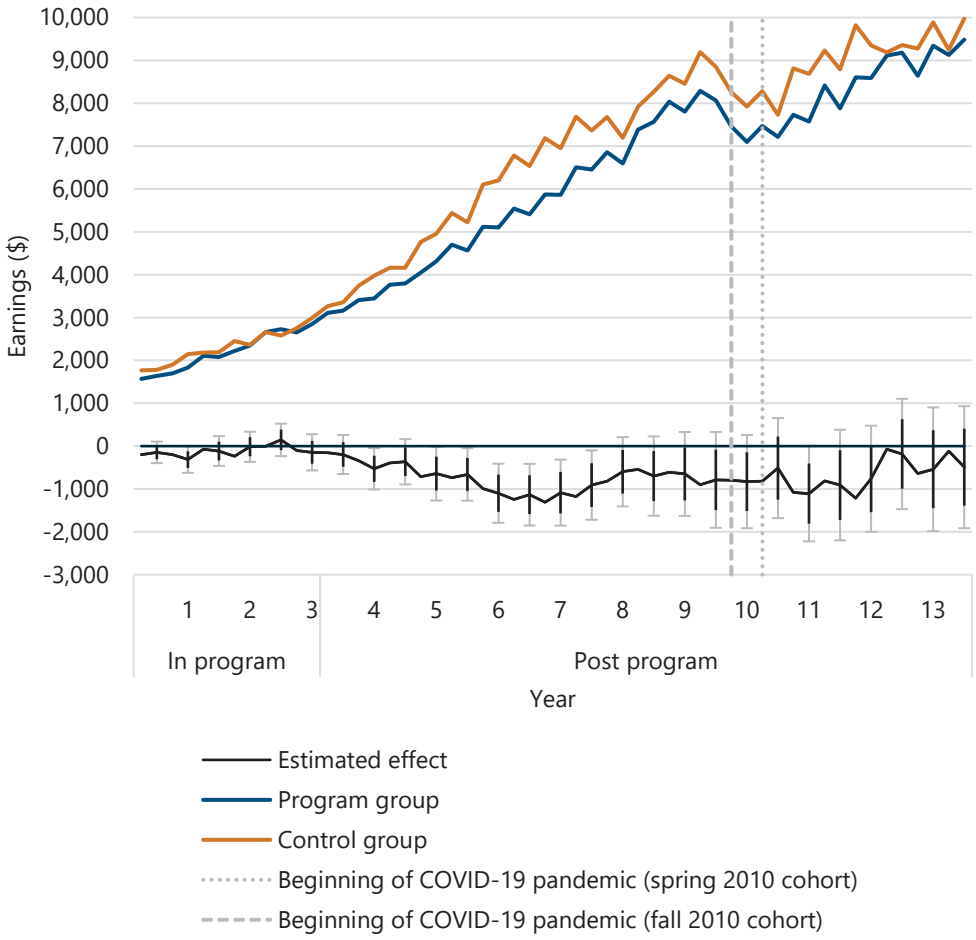
FURTHER INTERPRETING THE LABOR MARKET FINDINGS

The long-term labor market findings from the CUNY ASAP study offer a puzzling contrast to the program's well-documented impact on academic outcomes. ASAP led to large and sustained increases in degree completion. However, ASAP did not lead to measurable improvements in employment or earnings over nearly 14 years of follow-up in New York State. These results differ from the findings on a replication of ASAP in Ohio where positive effects on earnings were observed. Importantly, the Ohio study took place in a different economic context and that program had effects on bachelor's degrees in addition to associate's degrees.[24] The absence of labor market gains in the CUNY setting raises important questions about the contexts and mechanisms through which postsecondary credentials translate into economic opportunity.

23. Scrivener et al. (2015).

24. Hill, Warner, and Sommo (2025).

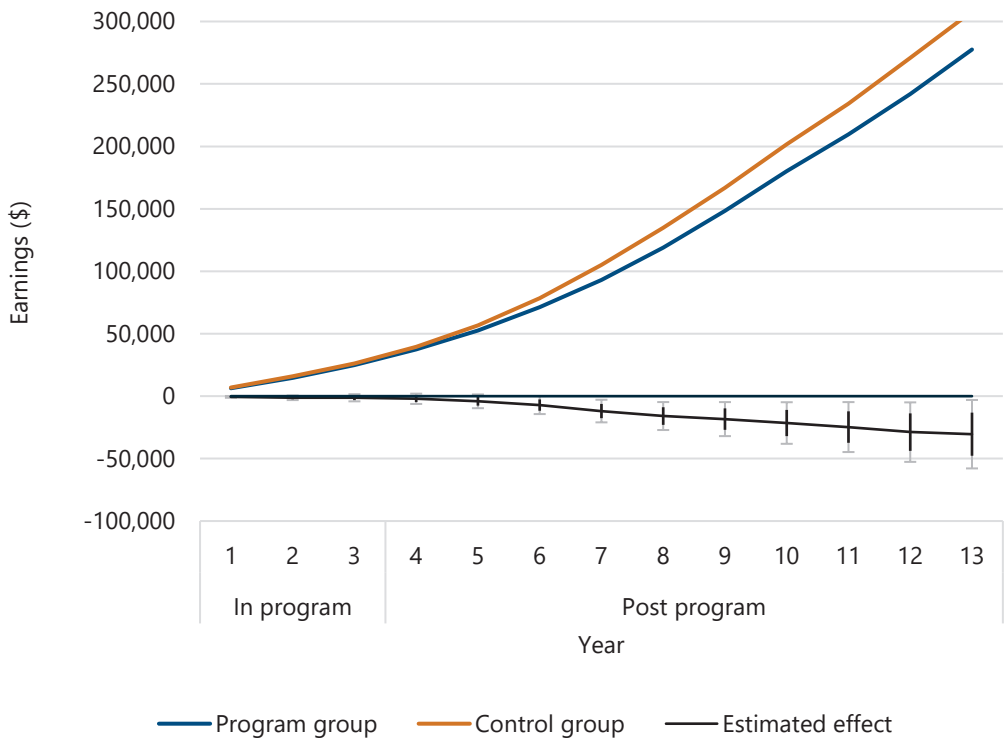
Figure 3. Quarterly Earnings in New York State



SOURCE: Data obtained from the New York State unemployment insurance database.

NOTES: Estimated effects are in 2023 dollars. Black and grey error bars represent 70 percent and 90 percent confidence intervals, respectively (presented every other quarter). The x-axis labels are underneath the last quarter of the year. Group means are regression adjusted. Earnings are those reported to the New York State unemployment insurance system during the relevant quarter after random assignment. The vertical dashed lines mark Q1 2020 for each cohort, as this is when the COVID-19 pandemic began, causing dips in employment rates. Program and control group sample sizes are 449 and 437, respectively.

Figure 4. Cumulative Earnings in New York State



SOURCE: Data obtained from the New York State unemployment insurance database.

NOTES: Estimated effects are in 2023 dollars. Black and grey error bars represent 70 percent and 90 percent confidence intervals, respectively (presented every other quarter). The x-axis labels are underneath the end of the year. Group means are regression adjusted. Earnings are those reported to the New York State unemployment insurance system during the relevant quarter after random assignment. Program and control group sample sizes are 449 and 437, respectively.

Although a complete and definitive explanation is not possible, several hypotheses can be examined. Some can be ruled out based on the available evidence, others remain plausible, and some will be explored in future work including a study of labor market data beyond New York State.

ASAP had positive effects on completing a degree, but which types of degrees were completed? ASAP increased students' likelihood of completing their degrees, but which types of degrees did ASAP participants complete? One hypothesis is that while ASAP boosted degree attainment overall, the program may have shifted students toward fields with lower labor market returns, such as liberal arts majors, rather than toward fields with higher returns, like health-related majors.

To examine this possibility, degrees earned by students in the evaluation sample were classified using CUNY's public Wage Dashboard.[25] The Dashboard reports the historical median earnings of all employed CUNY graduates, by degree field (for example, liberal arts or psychology) and level (for example, associate's or bachelor's degrees). Using these data, each degree earned in the study was assigned to one of four categories based on the historical earnings of all employed CUNY graduates completing that degree, not just on the earnings of ASAP sample members:

- Low-earning degrees
- Medium-earning degrees
- High-earning degrees
- Unknown

These categories provide an external benchmark that reflects long-run earnings patterns for each degree in the broader CUNY system, independent of the evaluation sample. Importantly, the low-, medium-, and high-earning classifications are relative to other degrees — not relative to the earnings of those students who do not complete a degree.

As shown in Table 3, most of ASAP's impact on degree completion came from students completing degrees in fields where employed CUNY graduates historically tend to have relatively low earnings (for example, an associate's degree in liberal arts) among CUNY graduates. This pattern may help explain the lack of detectable effects on participants' earnings. ASAP increased the likelihood that students completed a degree, but much of this gain came from moving students from the "no degree completed" category into completing degrees that typically yield relatively low earnings among CUNY graduates.

To be clear, "low-earning degrees" refers to differences in earnings across fields of study among degree completers, not to comparisons between students who completed a degree and students who did not. That is, graduates in these fields tend to earn less than graduates in other fields, not necessarily less than individuals who do not complete any degree at all. Degrees in these fields may still generate positive labor market returns relative to no degree. If so, the finding of no discernible impact on earnings, with suggestive evidence of negative effects, remains unexpected.

This raises questions: Do some degrees have low, no, or possibly even negative labor-market returns? How do earnings compare between students who complete these lower-earning degrees and those who do not complete a degree?

25. CUNY's public Wage Dashboard can be found at https://insights.cuny.edu/t/CUNYGuest/views/CUNYWageDashboard/Wage?%3Aembed=y&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y.

Table 3. Degree Category, by Median Wages Among CUNY Graduates 10 Years After Graduation

Outcome (%)	Program Group	Control Group	Estimated Effect	SE	90% CI	
					Lower	Upper
No degree completed	42.3	50.0	-7.7 **	3.3	-13.1	-2.3
Highest degree completed is in a field with median 10-year earnings that are relatively:						
Low	18.2	10.1	8.1 ***	2.3	4.3	11.9
Medium	11.3	11.2	0.1	2.2	-3.4	3.6
High	20.3	18.3	2.1	2.7	-2.3	6.4
Unknown	7.9	10.5	-2.6	2.0	-5.7	0.6

SOURCES: Data obtained from the City University of New York's (CUNY) Wage Dashboard (for classifying degrees) and CUNY's Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics.

NOTES: CI = Confidence interval. SE = Standard error. Means are regression adjusted.

The "Unknown" category includes a total of 82 students. Of these 82 students, 36 are students who earned a degree at a non-CUNY institution and therefore could not be classified using the CUNY Wage Dashboard data. The remaining 46 students earned a CUNY degree in a field that was not able to be matched to the CUNY Wage Dashboard data.

The most common degrees in the "Low" category are liberal arts associate's degrees, meant for transfer to a four-year institution, and human services associate's degrees.

The most common degrees in the "Medium" category are associate's degrees in business administration and accounting, and bachelor's degrees in sociology.

The most common degrees in the "High" category are bachelor's degrees in psychology and criminal justice.

The most common degrees in the "Unknown" category are associate's degrees in social sciences and criminal justice.

Program and control group sample sizes are 451 and 445, respectively.

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

In the final two years of follow-up, students in this study who earned a degree in a field classified as "low earning" still earned about $9,000 per year more, on average, than students in this study who did not complete a degree. Details are available in the supplementary materials that are available on the project page for this report.

This descriptive information does not provide causal proof of positive returns to CUNY's low-earning degrees; differences in earnings could reflect differences in who completes these degrees rather than the value of these degrees. However, this pattern — combined with complementary research suggesting positive returns to all CUNY degree types examined — does not support the hypothesis that degrees in certain fields have negative returns.[26]

Also of importance, there is no evidence that ASAP reduced students' likelihood of completing degrees in high-earning fields. In fact, the estimated effect on completing a high-earning degree is also positive — 2.1 percentage points — though not statistically significant. Thus,

26. Minaya, Scott-Clayton, and Thomas (2026).

while field of study may help explain the absence of large positive earnings effects, it does not explain the negative earnings effect estimates.

Could control group students have switched into high-earning majors that were ineligible for ASAP? Another related hypothesis is that ASAP's structure might have prevented students from pursuing certain high-earning majors. At the time of the evaluation, a small number of majors were ineligible for ASAP because their requirements made graduating within three years difficult. These majors were Allied Health Sciences, Pre-Clinical Nursing, Forensic Science, and Engineering Science. To be eligible for ASAP and the evaluation, students could not be enrolled in these majors at the start of the program, so both program and control group members were not enrolled in these majors when they joined the study. However, they could change majors later and it is feasible that those in ASAP would be less inclined to do so in order to remain in ASAP.

The evidence does not support the hypothesis that control group students later switched into these majors: Among the 670 degrees completed by students in the study sample, only 11 were in majors that were ineligible for ASAP at the time of the study. Thus, this explanation can largely be ruled out.

What about out-of-state earnings? A further consideration is that the earnings data used in this study come from New York State Department of Labor records, which do not capture employment outside of New York State. It is plausible that some students, particularly those who completed degrees, found employment out of state. Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) tabulations suggest that about 16 percent of associate's degree graduates from the study colleges are employed outside of New York State 10 years after graduation (among those employed, per PSEO's definition).[27] If ASAP increased the likelihood of out-of-state employment, estimates of its effects on employment and earnings would be biased downward.

This possibility will be explored in future work using national data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics dataset. Out-of-state employment could soften the suggestive negative findings. To bring the estimated effect on cumulative earnings to zero would require an average out-of-state employment impact of approximately 6.4 percentage points, which would be a large effect size.[28]

What about unobserved earnings? The New York State unemployment insurance data used for these analyses exclude self-employment, federal government employment, military jobs, and informal jobs. Future work may consider the sensitivity of the main findings to this limitation.

What do these findings tell us about the labor market returns to a CUNY associate's degree? For both conceptual and statistical reasons these results are not well-suited to estimating the

27. U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Economic Studies, Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program. (n.d.).

28. This calculation assumes that average out-of-state earnings are $9,158, which is the amount of average earnings of employed program group members in state.

returns to a CUNY associate's degree. Conceptually, using the findings to infer the returns to associate's degrees requires the strong assumption that labor market effects operate through degree completion alone. This assumption may not hold if, for example, the program's career and employment services influence labor market outcomes in ways that are independent of earning an associate's degree.

Even if one makes this strong assumption, the implied range of returns is imprecise. ASAP increased degree completion by 7.7 percentage points by the end of the follow-up period, with the impact peaking at 17.1 percentage points after three years. ASAP's estimated effect on yearly earnings during the last two years of follow-up is a decrease of $2,011, with a 90 percent confidence interval ranging from a decrease of $6,571 to an increase of $2,549 (see Table 2).

The combination of findings that ASAP led to more associate's degree completions and no clear earnings gains might appear to suggest that CUNY associate's degrees are not raising earnings. However, this study is not sensitive enough to support that conclusion.

A companion report estimates that completing a CUNY associate's degree increases annual earnings by an average of $10,000 to $14,000 per year.[29] For illustration, if the return to a CUNY associate's degree were $12,000 per year, then ASAP's increase in degree completion alone would be expected to yield increased earnings of $900 to $2,000 per year (7.7 percent or 17.1 percent × $12,000 per year). These values fall within the wide confidence interval for ASAP's effect on annual earnings.

The pattern of results seen here does not rule out that CUNY associate's degrees have large positive returns, as suggested elsewhere. The size of the degree impacts, the imprecision of the earnings estimates, and the strong assumptions required do not support confirming or ruling out large positive (or negative) returns to CUNY associate's degrees.[30]

REFLECTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The long-term labor market findings presented here add important nuance to the growing body of evidence on comprehensive student support programs. ASAP has consistently demonstrated large and sustained impacts on degree completion across multiple contexts but its effects on earnings are more mixed. In Ohio, a state with a very different economic context than New York City, programs modeled after ASAP produced positive earnings impacts six to eight years after enrollment. In contrast, the original CUNY study finds no evidence of positive labor market effects — and some suggestive evidence of negative impacts — nearly

29. Minaya, Scott-Clayton, and Thomas (2026).

30. Another possibility is that the negative earnings estimates are driven by a small number of high-earning individuals in the control group. Sensitivity analyses that top-coded the top 1 percent of earners confirm that outliers are not responsible for the findings. This explanation can also be ruled out.

14 years after program entry. Taken together these findings suggest that ASAP can improve earnings, but it is not a foregone conclusion based on graduation effects.

A planned synthesis of the long-term findings from the CUNY and Ohio evaluations will incorporate additional data on out-of-state earnings, and will examine how differences in program implementation, student populations, and local labor markets may relate to earnings impacts. By exploring these factors side-by-side, the synthesis will aim to bring to light practical insights about when programs like ASAP are more likely to produce economic benefits and to offer actionable lessons for the field. This synthesis will be published in the first half of 2028.

The present findings raise questions about how to maximize the labor market returns of programs like ASAP. One consideration is whether targeting or tailoring the program to students pursuing degrees in high-earning fields could enhance its economic impact, if that is a desired outcome. ASAP has proven effective at helping students complete degrees, but the labor market value of degrees varies widely by field of study. Aligning program support with pathways that lead to stronger earnings may be a promising direction for future innovation. Notably, in 2025 Arnold Ventures invested $35.6 million to replicate the ASAP model across the North Carolina Community College System.[31] This replication focuses on degree programs tied to high demand workforce sectors. While it's important not to conflate "high demand" with "high earnings," this investment demonstrates the potential of targeting ASAP to students in particular fields.

Finally, the findings suggest that caution should be used when forecasting long-term economic benefits based on short-term academic gains. Previous cost-benefit analyses of CUNY's ASAP found an impressive cost-benefit ratio, relying on the prediction that ASAP would have large positive effects on earnings, given its large effects on three-year graduation rates.[32] The current findings suggest that such forecasts can dramatically misstate long-term economic benefits, particularly if impacts on degree completion shrink over time or do not translate into expected labor market gains. As long-term data from more studies become available, there will be opportunities to revisit the predictive validity of such forecasts. The current report provides one datapoint suggesting caution is necessary.

Nearly 20 years ago, CUNY designed and developed ASAP with the goal of helping more students graduate from community college, and graduate more quickly. At the time, no college success program had been rigorously evaluated via a randomized controlled trial and been shown to dramatically increase graduation rates — ASAP did just that. The results of that trial were such an outlier that the question of replicability loomed large. Might the original study have been a fluke? Could the program work outside of New York City? Multiple replications have proven that the original study was no anomaly: ASAP has had large effects on degree completion in four rigorous experimental evaluations.

31. Arnold Ventures (2025).

32. Levin and García (2017).

As more colleges adopt and adapt ASAP, it will be important to understand how program design, institutional context, and local labor market conditions interact to shape long-term success. This study contributes a critical piece to that broader evidence base and points to the need for ongoing inquiry into how best to support students not only through college, but into meaningful and rewarding careers.

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