An experimental program in New York is tripling the odds of student success

BY ANN HULBERT

WHEN DAQUAN McGEE got accepted to the Borough of Manhattan Community College in the spring of 2010, he was 19 and still finding his footing after a two-year prison sentence for attempted robbery. He signed up for the standard battery of placement tests in reading, writing and math; took them cold; and failed two—writing and math. Steered into summer developmental education (otherwise known as remediation), he enrolled in an immersion writing course, which he passed while working full time at a Top Tomato Super Store. Then McGee learned of a program for which a low-income student like him might qualify, designed to maximize his chances of earning a degree. At a late-summer meeting, he got the rundown on the demands he would face.

McGee would have to enroll full time in the fall, he was told; part-time attendance was not permitted. Every other week, he would be required to meet with his adviser, who would help arrange his schedule and track his progress. In addition to his full course load, McGee would have to complete his remaining remedial class, in math, immediately. If he slipped up, his adviser would hear about it from his instructor—and mandatory tutoring sessions would follow. If he failed, he would have to retake the class right away. Also on McGee’s schedule was a non-optional, noncredit weekly College Success Seminar, featuring time-management strategies, tips on study habits and goal setting, exercises in effective communication, and counsel on other life skills. The instructor would be taking attendance. If McGee complied with all that was asked of him, he would be eligible for a monthly drill: lining up in one of the hallways in the main campus building to receive a free, unlimited MetroCard good for the following month. More important, as long as he stayed on track, the portion of his tuition not already covered by financial aid would be waived.

In a hurry to make up for his wasted prison years, McGee signed up. The pace, as he’d been warned, was fast from the start, and did not ease up after the fall. McGee, a guy with a stocky, boxer’s build, doesn’t gush—he conveys low-key composure—but when I met him in October 2012, early in his third year, he had only praise for the unremitting pushiness, and for the array of financial benefits that came along with it. The package was courtesy of a promising experimental initiative that goes by the snappy acronym ASAP, short for Accelerated Study in Associate Programs. Last winter, McGee graduated with an associate degree in multimedia studies. It had taken him 2½ years.
Committing to completion

In the community college world, McGee’s achievement is a shockingly rare feat, and the program that so intently encouraged him to accomplish it is a striking anomaly. The country’s low-cost sub-baccalaureate system—created a century ago to provide an open and affordable entry into higher education to an ever more diverse group of Americans—now enrolls 45 percent of all U.S. undergraduates, many of them part-time students. But only a fraction ever earn a degree, and hardly anyone does it quickly.

The associate degree is nominally a two-year credential, and the system is proud of its transfer function, sending students onward to four-year schools, as juniors, to pursue a bachelor’s degree—the goal that 80 percent of entrants say they aspire to. Reality, however, typically confounds that tidy timeline. In urban community colleges like the Borough of Manhattan Community College, the national three-year graduation rate is 16 percent. Nationwide, barely more than a third of community college enrollees emerge with a certificate or degree within six years. Behind these dismal numbers lie the best of intentions. Community colleges have made it their mission to offer easy access, flexibility and lots of options to a commuter population now dominated by “nontraditional” students.

If anything, with enthusiasm rising for massive online courses, or MOOCs, the higher education pendulum is now swinging further in this direction. The current interest in “competency-based learning”—liberating students to earn degrees not by amassing credit hours but by preparing for assessments of particular skills at whatever pace and by whichever route they choose—is part of the same trend. Some reformers see the seeds of a revolution in college education, promising ultraconvenient, self-guided, low-cost courses of study for everyone. The “beginning of the unbundling of the American university” is how one observer has described the transformation. All it will take for students to avail themselves of this emerging opportunity is a clear sense of where they’re headed, lots of self-motivation, and good access to information about what mix of skills is likely to lead to a promising career.

And therein, of course, lies the problem. If you stop and think about it, the existing postsecondary educational hierarchy could hardly be more perverse. Students at the bottom, whose life histories and social disadvantages make them the most likely to need clear guidance and structure, receive astonishingly little of either. Meanwhile, students at the super-selective top, prodded toward high ambitions and disciplined habits by attentive parents and teachers ever since preschool, encounter solicitous oversight every step of the way.

In 2009, President Obama announced his American Graduation Initiative, calling on community colleges in particular to boost their completion rates. Yet a burgeoning array of efforts to help struggling students over this or that hump has, for the most part, delivered disappointing answers. Despite lots of pilot programs that have produced small, short-term boosts (marginally more students passing remedial courses or persisting for another semester), graduation rates so far have barely budged.

The implicit philosophy behind the program is simple: Students, especially the least prepared ones, don’t just need to learn math or science; they need to learn how to navigate academic and institutional challenges more broadly, and how to plot a course—daily, weekly, monthly—toward long-term success.

ASAP has proved to be a remarkable exception. Launched in 2007 with funding from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Center for Economic Opportunity, it is an unusually ambitious effort to propel low-income students through six of the City University of New York’s seven community colleges. ASAP’s architects set a goal that the program’s top administrator described to me as “insane”—a three-year graduation rate of 50 percent—and according to the university’s own data, the program has exceeded it. The social-policy research organization MDRC (formerly the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation), which began an independent study of the program in 2010, calls ASAP’s record “unparalleled.” Researchers randomly assigned the study participants to either ASAP or the regular community college track, and while three-year results won’t be ready until this summer, preliminary outcomes, just released, show the ASAP students to be dramatically outstripping the control group on every count—persistence, credits earned and graduation rates. A third of the students who enrolled in ASAP in the spring of 2010 finished in 2½ years (compared with 18 percent of the control group). Nationwide, that’s the proportion of all community college students who emerge with a credential in six years.

The secret of ASAP’s success lies outside the classroom. The program enlists extra tutors and caps some classes at 25 students, but otherwise doesn’t touch pedagogy. Instead it aims to counter the community college culture of early exits and erratic stops and starts. ASAP is designed to instill, and make it possible to fulfill, the expectation that college will be a continuous, full-time commitment, just as it is for traditional, four-year students on leafy quads. Timing matters: Miss out on getting a postsecondary credential by 26, and your odds of ever earning one drop.

ASAP offers lots of guidance, a dose of goading and a variety of well-timed incentives to its participants (average age at admission: 21), who must sign on to the goal of graduating within three years. The program is intended primarily for low-income students with moderate remedial needs, and it accepts applicants on a first-come, first-served basis. By next fall, ASAP expects to enroll more than 4,000 students. [Editor’s note: The Professional Staff Congress, the union representing faculty and staff at CUNY, has gone to the state capital to argue for resources to expand the ASAP approach across the system.]

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prepared ones, don't just need to learn math or science; they need to learn how to navigate academic and institutional challenges more broadly, and how to plot a course—daily, weekly, monthly—toward long-term success. Pushy parents, an asset many of them don't have, could tell you what it takes to make that happen: a mix of enabling and persistent nudging.

Lesley Leppert-McKeever, who has directed the Borough of Manhattan Community Colleges ASAP program from the start, summed up the message to students this way: "Look, if you do your part, we'll do our part, and together we'll be able to meet your target."

ASAP director Lesley Leppert-McKeever, shown with Bryant and McGee, makes sure everyone does his or her part to make ASAP a success.

ASAP advisers presume that building habits of engagement takes concerted effort. It's not just that students are stretched thin by family and work demands. Many also lack college-savvy guidance at home, or past school experience to draw on.

ASAP's structure and no-nonsense style invite accusations of paternalism—precisely what community colleges have been eager to avoid in the college-for-all era. Yet the prevailing model, a Chinese-menu-style panoply of options without any real guidance, has not empowered academically insecure students; it has failed them. Good information, well-structured expectations, timely counsel, confidence-instilling directives—these are essential ingredients of education, and they are all the more important for marginal students and for those blazing a trail to college for the first time in their family's history. ASAP sets out to take students' college goals seriously, and to help equip its participants to take those goals seriously as well. The program's ethos of persistence is contagious. "There's definitely a shift, different for every student," Leppert-McKeever told me, "when suddenly an immature, unfocused student gets more serious."

ASAP isn't cheap—the program spends roughly $3,500 annually per student, on top of the $9,800 that the CUNY community college system spends on each of its full-time students every year—yet if you calculate expenditures per student who actually graduates, it saves money. The program isn't cutting-edge either, except in delivering unprecedented completion rates. Scaling up such a comprehensive effort would be a challenge, and full-time college, of course, is never going to be for everyone. Yet at a moment when proponents of "disruptive" technology are promising a transformation of higher education, ASAP offers a different path, based on the premise that disruptions on the way to degrees are exactly what students at lower-tier schools need to avoid. If America is serious about being an opportunity society, Daquan McGee and students like him deserve the advantages of the old, steady way of going to college and starting on their careers.