Increasing college attainment offers tremendous promise for increasing social mobility, tackling poverty, and reducing racial and income inequality, aspirations that are more vital than ever as the devastating impact of the pandemic has fallen disproportionately on people of color. Yet for too many policymakers and practitioners, the path to growing our college completion rates for all students has been elusive. The U.S. has made steady progress in increasing college-going rates, but its success in increasing the proportion of Americans with college degrees has been more measured and inequitable. Completion rates are lower among Black and Latino students than white students, and among community college students than those attending four-year institutions. As a result, the very students for whom a college degree could be a life-changing event are still left out of the college earnings premium.

**What is a CASS program?** Over the past decade, innovative leaders have pioneered a new approach to raising postsecondary completion rates that goes beyond financial support: comprehensive student success initiatives, or CASS. CUNY ASAP is the best known such program, but there are similar models throughout the country that employ an advisor, coach, or case manager to help students connect with customized support, often including financial help, academic support, and housing, transportation, childcare, career, and other assistance.

Rigorous evaluations of these initiatives have yielded striking results, and more research is underway.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Persistence</th>
<th><strong>InsideTrack</strong> yielded a 15% increase in retention rates of Pell-eligible students in one year.</th>
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<td><strong>One Million Degrees</strong> led to a 47% increase in the persistence of full-time students in one year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Degree Completion</td>
<td><strong>CUNY ASAP</strong> participants graduated from college at twice the rate of students in the control group, six years after enrolling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Earnings</td>
<td><strong>Project QUEST</strong> participants’ earnings grew from an average of $11,722 to $33,644 over the course of the evaluation.</td>
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</table>
Recommendations

This research suggests that CASS is ready to scale and that doing so could double the community college graduation rate to 50 percent or higher within three years of entry. State policymakers can act on these lessons by:

- **Growing only what works** – expanding and replicating models with solid evidence of impact on postsecondary persistence and completion and student earnings, as demonstrated by significant and substantial positive findings in rigorous evaluations.
- **Empowering proven leaders to support emerging and ongoing efforts** – programs with a successful record of increasing college persistence and attainment, and increasing student earnings, are well-positioned to provide technical assistance and facilitate learning communities for newer programs statewide.
- **Allocating funds based on goals, need, and state strategies** – states should establish goals for reducing equity gaps and increasing postsecondary completion rates and allocate funds to institutions and non-profit organizations that can help achieve those goals.
- **Ongoing monitoring** – states should monitor grantees to ensure services are implemented with fidelity to the model.
- **Integrating CASS into institutional priorities** – CASS programs have the greatest impact when they are integrated into the strategic plans, budgets, and accreditation artifacts of schools.
- **Providing for a planning year** – ample planning time builds investment among institutional leadership and staff.
Endnotes


3. The University of Chicago Poverty Lab. 2020. The University of Chicago Poverty Lab Finds Community College Program Significantly Improves Enrollment and Persistence. https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/attachments/f3375bf155d8be74ff62b0e172b9bb869b16738af/store/41b366babe21a5f0f31666d3f7c720333cb08acfcacbc509658c589c8de99/1_OMD+Press+Release_FINAL.pdf

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

