THIRD WAY

INTERVIEW *Published May 12, 2025 • Updated May 20, 2025 • 14 minute read*

Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Constance Barnes

Ben Cecil, *Senior Education Policy Advisor,* ***Romelo Wilson,*** *Education Communications Advisor*

Director of CUNY ASAP | ACE National Replication Collaborative, Dr. Constance Barnes, sat down with Senior Education Policy Advisor, Ben Cecil, to discuss a student success model that has proven to keep more than 100,000 students on track and graduating on time. From return on investment for both students and taxpayers to the importance of wraparound support, Dr. Barnes breaks down what makes the ASAP model so effective and why more institutions and state systems are taking note.

Video Transcript

Ben Cecil: Welcome back to Interviews with Influencers. My name is Ben Cecil, Senior Education Policy Advisor at Third Way, and I'm your host for this special edition today.

As College Completion Day approaches on May 19th, we're featuring experts that are helping students not just get into college—but get through it. Today, we have Dr. Constance Barnes, Director of CUNY ASAP and ACE's National Replication Collaborative. She leads a model that has been replicated across

the country that transforms student success by providing more than 100,000 students with the financial, academic, and personal support they need to stay on track and graduate on time.

Dr. Barnes, thank you so much for joining us today.

Dr. Barnes: Thank you for having me.

Ben Cecil: I'm really excited to dig in and learn a little bit more about this program. So how did CUNY ASAP get its start and then what helped it grow into a nationally replicated model—kind of the gold standard for student success?

Dr. Barnes: Absolutely. So back in 2007, during Mayor Bloomberg's tenure, he took a look around and noticed that in New York City, certain communities were not attaining their college degrees. So, they were not obtaining college degrees and not contributing to economics in the way that he desired. And so, he thought about how he could support students at the community colleges to get across the finish line.

He proposed a plan with the money behind it and asked folks at CUNY if it would be possible to do it. He wanted to know if CUNY could double these graduation rates for our students. At CUNY, I think most people know that we are the largest urban university and we serve mostly Black and brown students at some of our campuses.

You'll find over 100 different nationalities and cultures present. Those are the students that we really wanted to get to the finish line. So again, he proposed this to, at the time, Dr. Donna Linderman, who is now at SUNY, working with John King. She was spearheading this along with the legendary John Mogalesque.

So they took on the challenge. They reached out and got about 1,000* students—and they were successful. They were able to help those students get to the finish line. Once we saw that it worked with those hundred, then we continued to scale. In 2015, I believe it was, we've jumped up to 4,000.

If you look at our trajectory, you'll see where we jump up to that larger scale. We currently serve about 24,000. We were 25,000 pre-pandemic. At the same time we decided to grow in New York City, that's when replication began outside of the state. That's when we went to Ohio—for our first replication outside of New York City.

Ben Cecil: That's a really incredible story. It's always great when opportunity meets resources to help make that opportunity happen for students.

So after its early success, I know ASAP began focusing on students that were in developmental courses, who now make up a good bit of each cohort. Research has shown these students are graduating at significantly higher rates than their peers.

So what do you think makes ASAP so effective in supporting students who maybe need a little bit of extra academic preparation?

Dr. Barnes: So, CUNY did move to the co-requisite models and stepped away from developmental ones. And that's CUNY-wide that we now have co-requisite courses instead of the kind of separate developmental courses.

Fundamentally, ASAP is a holistic program. We are based on three tenets, which is the financial incentive, academic momentum, and integration and belonging. So I think having that foundation for all of our students, but particularly those students who may have had academic challenges, helps them identify what it means to be a college student.

A lot of our students are first generation. They may be first generation to go to college or first generation American. So it's really important for them to understand what it means to be in the college space and what it means to belong to a program like ASAP. Our advisors in ASAP follow students from the day that they enroll through graduation. So that is another thing that is very different from a lot of programs, and again, provides that support.

Our advisors are trained in a very intense model that really looks at all of the different possibilities for students—if it's students who are coming from foster care or it's students who are parents. They connect the students with all the different available resources on campus. That way, students can focus more on school and less on the obstacles. Removing the obstacles to graduation completion, so students can finish on time.

Ben Cecil: That's incredible to hear, and we know research shows that those wraparound support services are important in getting students across the finish line. And at the same time, those wraparound supports are not always cheap. They can be expensive to make sure that we can do that effectively for all students.

So given that ASAP serves the public university system in New York City, most of your funding comes from New York City and from the state. But as we talk about this replication and scaling up, and the replication that has happened across the country, how have you all approached understanding the costs associated with these different contexts? And with that, how have you thought about the role of public funding, institutional funding or even philanthropic funding sources, and expanding this work to reach more students around the country?

Dr. Barnes: First, I'll say that I know that there are still a lot of reports that probably have the old costs, which were very high when we first started. We have been able to find the economies of scale through working from a systems approach. So we brought that cost down tremendously.

When we look across the country, I would say there is a flat budget that folks need. It's pretty similar because our program honestly is administratively heavy. We have those roles—the advisor, the director

who's specific for ASAP—which can be a challenge in some of our smaller colleges throughout, but again, they've navigated that.

And what we do at CUNY, because we approach it from a consortium model, is a lot of the top down administrative overhead housed within the central office. When we look across the country, we've tried to move away from these single college efforts, and really address systematic changes. So working with the legislature in those states, looking at a variety of factors to see if the state replication is ready.

As you mentioned, it's thinking about what type of state or local funding options do they have. Is it performance-based funding? Do they have some sort of merit funding? Are there specific initiatives like workforce development that may be able to alleviate some of the costs of ASAP and helping states to sort of tap into that?

For example, in North Carolina, we just launched North Carolina Boost. There are nine colleges now. There will be 15 in total if I have my numbers correct. They are specifically focused on the workforce development initiative that the governor has implemented. So funding will come from there.

And so, ASAP can fit in two different spaces. I think that's the great part about replication, and what other states are starting to understand is that there are ways to adapt and be flexible with that. As far as philanthropy, we are grateful. We are grateful at CUNY, for philanthropy, and across the country with our states because that usually is the primary funder for startups of replication. Without those philanthropic funds, we probably would not have a lot of our replication sites. We may not even exist as a replication team. So that's really important.

It also has helped to fund the RCTs that contribute to our evidence base, which again has been very important to support this model and help more states take it on. When I think about CUNY ASAP, I think one of the secrets is the fact that the program can fit into what some states need. Rather than saying, this is the program you must implement in this way, it has some malleability that can really meet the different needs of different states.

Ben Cecil: As someone that used to work in an institution. I know that it's really helpful when you can take something and make it your own rather than it being completely prescriptive. I think that helps with buy-in too.

Dr. Barnes: Definitely. That's part of what the replication team will do. We sit with the states that are trying to implement and think about if they already have something that exists. How can we then layer on top of where it fits? What would they need to tweak? We do have a fidelity to model inventory. There are those things that I mentioned that the model must have. But as states start to complete those, we can then sit with them and discuss any additional adaptations.

And then look at our own practices and say, “Well, maybe we should be doing some of the things that they do in Colorado or in North Carolina to also benefit our students.” It’s a two-way relationship where we're learning and the states are learning from us as well.

Ben Cecil: I love that. I think another piece of the ASAP program that is really important to highlight is that it's been shown to not only save money, but also improve outcomes at the same time. Oftentimes we don't get that. So what that means is that the program generates really strong returns for both taxpayers that are investing in higher ed, but also the students that are going to college. So what do you think makes the program so cost-effective, and why should that matter to policymakers in the public?

Dr. Barnes: So right now we're having a lot of discussions about ROI, and what ROI means for different stakeholders—what is it for the students, what is it for the university, and then what is it for the good of the city.

For the students, clearly, there's an ROI because their tuition is reduced. They're getting their degrees. Hopefully, they've gotten some career support that launches them into their first careers. What we've also noticed is that across the board, most of our students stay within their locale. So for New York, I'm a CUNY graduate. Most of our students remain in the cities that they come from and give back.

So they're contributing to that tax base. When we talk about the institution, it is not immediate returns that we see, but over time, we do see that there are those returns because students are retained at a higher rate, which means there is increased tuition.

Students are taking more courses. We require students to take a full-time course load. So the more you add those courses, again, you're contributing to the tuition and the funding base to the school. We have seen in Ohio that students there are earning about 11% more than their counterparts. So again, it is driving the economic stability in the cities and the states where they are, and providing that tax base. So it's really important to look at it holistically, not just the costs with the immediate return, but to see those long-term picture returns.

Ben Cecil: That's so important too, because at Third Way we’ve done a ton of polling around this and asked voters what they think the value of higher ed is. Is it the soft skills argument, or is it the economic returns and getting a job argument? It can be both. Voters think it's both, but when you're forced to pick between the two, generally the economic outcomes favor a little bit higher.

They can return on investment not only economically for the city, but then also, there’s the tangible benefits of students staying in their communities and giving back and contributing.

Dr. Barnes: Also, reducing the need for some of these public assistance benefits, right? So if you're gainfully working, making a living wage, you're less likely to need public assistance in any form. It’s really important for the good of the city.

Ben Cecil: Of course. If there's one thing that you would want policymakers to understand about your students in the program, what do you think that would be?

Dr. Barnes: I would say that our students are waiting for an opportunity. I think it's really important that there is a large swath of students across the nation who truly desire to go to college and to complete college because, for a long time, I think conversations and equity were based around access. It's about access, but it's also about what it takes to actually finish college.

So, I think that what you will see in all of the students who are in ASAP and ACE, they truly want this opportunity and they want to graduate. However we can support them from the state level, institution level, and just locally to that goal.

Ben Cecil: I think if I could have that on a banner just everywhere because no student goes to college, not wanting to finish. I think that is such an important thing that we have to remember and know that we don't have it completely figured out, but we do a relatively good job.

But I think the question we have to keep pushing ourselves to ask is: access to what? Because access to completion—that's the key piece of the puzzle. If we're just talking about access to higher ed and then hoping you make it to the other side of that experience, that can sometimes leave quite a bit to be desired. Particularly for students who start college, potentially take out a loan, don't finish, and then don't reap the financial benefits of actually having a completed degree. It's about making sure students are not worse off for starting college and not finishing. And I think that's so important.

My last question for you today is what about your job working in this program brings you the most joy every day?

Dr. Barnes: I think knowing the end goal and being able to see the students who are graduating. As I mentioned, I'm a CUNY alum. I've been a faculty at CUNY colleges and so I know who these students are very intimately. As the Director of Replication, I do get to travel and hear the stories of the students and other parts of the country.

When you hear those stories that you can actually see with the students is why I'm here. And that is really who I am to be. I'm not quite boots on the ground anymore. I'm a little bit removed, but to have that access to boots on the ground to know that this is really changing lives. That's not just the slogan. It's really happening. That is the best part of my job.

Ben Cecil: Dr. Barnes, thank you so much for joining us today. This has been a really great conversation and I really appreciate you sharing your joy and infectious passion around this. It's just really exciting to hear. So thank you so much for joining us. Really appreciate your time.

Dr. Barnes: Thank you. Appreciate you.

** Correction: Dr. Barnes later clarified that the correct number of students was approximately 1,000, not 100.*