



Building momentum for postsecondary success



**EDUCATION COMMISSION  
OF THE STATES**  
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# The City University of New York: Early Progress

LEARNING FROM  
**THE REFORM**   
from STRONG START TO FINISH

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## About Strong Start to Finish

Right now, a first-year student sits in a college classroom being ill-served by remedial math. And if we fail them, they most likely will not earn their degree. There is a persistent trend among students placed in remedial or developmental courses—particularly math and English. They are not completing the courses and, in most cases, should not be taking them in the first place. This should not be their path.

We are a network of like-minded individuals and organizations from the policy, research, and practice spaces who've come together for one reason—to help all students, not just the select few, find success in postsecondary education.

[Strong Start to Finish](#), an initiative of [Education Commission of the States](#), was created to better the chances of low-income students, students of color, and returning adult students to create a fundamental shift in the outcome of their college journey. We have networked higher education leaders, policy entrepreneurs, institutions, and technical assistance providers to drive toward an outcome where all students pass their first credit-bearing English and math courses during the first year of study.

# Introduction

CUNY has committed to a systemwide goal of doubling its three-year associate degree graduation rates from 17% to 35%. To achieve this goal, the system aims to double the number of new students completing gateway math and English courses to 16,000 each year. Currently, however, a large number of students who enroll at CUNY’s 10 associate-granting institutions are not immediately placed into gateway courses but rather are assigned to developmental education in at least one subject. Thus, in order to achieve the overall goal, efforts to improve gateway course completion rates must first focus on the effectiveness of the pathways toward credit-bearing coursework. Another component of CUNY’s goal is to encourage new associate students

to take a higher number of credits in their first year, so that they are more likely to move forward to degree completion. Despite recent changes in CUNY leadership, the system remains dedicated to these reform goals.

At the same time, real progress at the system level can only occur by reducing achievement gaps, including differences at the level of developmental education instruction and placement into gateway courses. Historically, developmental education policies have disproportionately precluded students of color and other underserved populations from taking credit-bearing courses. Successful developmental education reform must include removing those barriers.

Timeline of Reform	
2007	Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)
2009	CUNY Start
2017	Academic Momentum Campaign
2018	Launch of CUNY-Strong Start to Finish Project
2020	Implementation of multiple measures placement system

## Changes in Developmental Instruction to Date

Accomplishing the goals will take significant improvements in developmental instruction and other course redesign efforts. CUNY colleges currently provide a range of options for developmental education. In recent years, given the imperative to get more students into and through gateway math and English courses, many of the colleges have been developing or expanding corequisite courses and other student support options, such as pre-matriculation programs, with promising results. As of fall 2016, seven CUNY colleges offered corequisite or accelerated English courses and six colleges offered at least one corequisite math course.

The number of corequisite courses offered at each college and level of faculty experience in developing them ranges widely, however. The colleges also have

taken different approaches to designing corequisite courses, including the number of contact hours, integration of supplemental instruction, and other factors. Through the CUNY-Strong Start to Finish project, all of the colleges are taking the next steps needed to implement or expand the work, while learning from other colleges’ successes and challenges.

## CUNY-Strong Start to Finish

CUNY-SSTF is led by a team composed of central office administrators, campus leaders and faculty, representing all 10 of its open admission associate-granting institutions. These institutions collectively serve more than 25,000 first-year students each year. As part of this initiative, [CUNY will](#) gradually replace traditional, standalone developmental courses by expanding existing pre-matriculation programs—including high-impact, intensive workshops—as well as corequisite courses. Through the project, teams of

experienced faculty are developing new corequisite courses and professional development is being provided to faculty interested in teaching these courses.

The CUNY-SSTF effort builds on a set of existing system reforms that focus on strategies such as degree maps, efforts to promote more credit-taking, and intensive student services support. In addition, CUNY has invested in successful pre-matriculation offerings such as [CUNY Start](#) and [Math Start](#). The activities in these existing reforms are complemented by the CUNY-SSTF project work.

CUNY-SSTF is specifically focusing on four priority action areas to achieve the broad goals of increasing the number of new students completing gateway math and English courses and improving associate degree graduation rates.

1. Increase the number of students completing gateway math courses in their first year.
2. Double the number completing both math and English courses in their first year.
3. Assign students who would have been placed into traditional remediation to an alternate, comprehensive set of reforms.
4. Increase the average number of credits a new associate student earns in the first year, putting most students on track to graduate in three years.

Participating institutions have committed to a number of activities as part of the project, including creating teams of math and English faculty who will redesign gateway courses as corequisite offerings, providing the resources of campus Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) to support faculty, and ensuring that sufficient corequisite gateway courses are offered each semester.

The institutions are being supported by the CUNY-SSTF Leadership Team as well as the Mathematics Innovation Team (MIT), which includes faculty leaders from CUNY colleges who have successfully implemented corequisite instruction. This team serves in an overarching advisory role and engages peers at other colleges. Project team leaders are partnering with Complete College America (CCA), an expert in corequisite remediation reform strategies to inform their work.

The following sections describe the context of reform within the system, the current status of project activities, and some early insights coming out of the work.

## Policy Background

### Remediation and Placement Policies

CUNY-wide policies on remediation and placement, which are set by the Board of Trustees and the Chancellery, have shifted over time. In 1999, the Board required CUNY 4-year institutions to eliminate traditional developmental courses during regular academic terms and required students to pass three Freshman Skills Assessment tests; they subsequently allowed exemptions for students who met certain cut points on the SAT or New York State Regents Exams. Also, they required students in math remediation to pass an assessment test in order to progress to a credit-bearing math course, and then added a similar requirement for reading and writing remediation.

In recent years, however, there has been a recognition that traditional remediation or developmental courses are not working. [In 2016](#), about three-quarters of CUNY community college students were placed into at least one developmental course, but almost 90% did not earn a degree on time and the majority dropped out. As a result, new approaches began to be considered, and the system began the process of amending policies on placement and remediation. For example:

- CUNY instituted an automatic retesting policy in fall 2016 for students who score just below the cutoff, thereby providing more students access to regular credit-bearing gateway courses.
- Simultaneously, it eased the policy of preventing enrollment by developmental education students in credit bearing courses, to allow placement of these in corequisite credit courses with extra support.

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CUNY has also developed a number of initiatives and programs over time to promote student completion broadly, as well as strategies to support students in their early years in a more targeted way.

## Accelerated Study in Associate Programs

For example, the nationally recognized Accelerated Study in Associate Programs ([ASAP](#)) helps students earn associate degrees within three years by providing a range of financial, academic, and personal supports. Students agree to attend CUNY full time and continuously enroll in developmental courses until they pass, with structured pathways that help them gain academic momentum as well as comprehensive assistance including intensive advising, tutoring, transfer assistance, tuition and fee waivers, and other supports. The ASAP program has been [highly successful](#) at increasing completion rates and is now expanding to serve half of all first-time associate freshmen at CUNY.

## Academic Momentum Campaign

The [Academic Momentum Campaign](#) was launched in 2017 in partnership with Complete College America (CCA). In addition to the expansion of ASAP and the placement and remediation policy changes that began in 2016, the Campaign pulled together a variety of existing strategies while adding some new elements.

- CUNY has required that colleges create degree maps for each major that show, for each semester, which courses will lead to completion. Although many of the colleges have existing degree maps to some extent, they are now required to make maps more complete for all majors and to ensure they are used by both students and advisors.

- The Take 30 communication campaign was launched to encourage 15 credits per semester as standard for full-time enrollment. [Research](#) suggests that almost 22 percent of CUNY students who take 15 credits in their first semester graduate in four years, compared to 16 percent of students who take 12 credits.
- Other existing programs, including intensive pre-matriculation offerings like CUNY Start and Math Start (see [appendix](#)), complement these efforts.

Given this context, the efforts to scale corequisite courses at all colleges, in combination with the expansion of existing pre-matriculation interventions and revised placement policies that assign more students to credit-bearing courses, should lead to significant reduction of traditional remediation at CUNY colleges in the next few years. CUNY-SSTF will support this change by allowing faculty dedicated time to develop corequisite courses, providing professional development resources to faculty, convening faculty and other college stakeholders to share best practices, and creating consistent training and communication materials to support the change process.

## Priority Action Areas

The broad goal of CUNY-SSTF project activities is to support faculty in developing or redesigning corequisite courses on their campuses. Traditional, standalone developmental courses will be phased out by 2023 and replaced with a combination of intensive pre-matriculation workshops and corequisite courses for students who enroll.

To do this, the project is supporting institutions in a number of ways:

- A Faculty Residency program that provides experienced faculty with the time and resources to develop corequisite courses and to mentor the instructors who are teaching the new corequisite courses;
- Opportunities for networking and professional development through a range of convenings; and
- Standardized training resources for advisors and students.

## Overview of the Faculty Residency Program

A key aspect of the project is the use of a faculty residency program to help design corequisite courses and develop teacher training materials. For each campus, the faculty residency teams comprise two math faculty members and one English faculty

member who have successfully redesigned English or math gateway courses in the past. During the two-year residencies, release time is provided for each faculty member on the team. The residency teams design new corequisite courses, create course redesign handbooks, develop teacher and supplemental instructor training materials, and host meetings in which faculty examine actual course outcome data.

**“Thanks to the access granted to rigorous credit-bearing math and English courses via the corequisite remediation structure, our students are finally able to demonstrate that their ability to achieve is much greater than suggested by flawed placement exams. CUNY’s SSTF project has supplied faculty the training and resources needed to fully scale these offerings and provide students the opportunities they depend on to graduate.”**

*- G. Michael Guy, University Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies*

Faculty residents are supported during this process by their colleges’ Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs), which then organize and deliver intensive trainings in the corequisite courses for other teachers and supplemental instructors on their campuses.

## Structure and Sequencing

To structure the project activities, an initial decision was made to use two “waves” of institutions. The first group comprises institutions that have faculty with some experience and/or interest in corequisite courses and are ready to start scaling (six campuses – Borough of Manhattan Community College

(BMCC), Bronx, City Tech, Hostos, LaGuardia, and Queensborough). The second group of institutions has needed more time to build consensus and plan corequisite courses. In addition, each college had different needs and strategies in mind when starting the project; for example, some planned to start with math corequisite courses, while others chose to focus on English. For each group of institutions, the Chief Academic Officers worked with Math and English Chairs at each college to select department leaders in math and English for the two-year faculty residencies and consider which courses to redesign or expand.

**“SSTF has provided CUNY with a powerful vehicle to remove barriers to academic momentum for our associate-seeking students. SSTF is allowing us to accelerate significant expansion of corequisite course offerings to help more students complete their gateway math and English courses within their first year and importantly provide significant faculty development to ensure high-quality instruction.”**

*-Donna Linderman, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs,  
CUNY/SSTF Leadership Team member*

In spring 2018, the first group of faculty residencies were decided. The Math Innovation Team (MIT) then conducted visits to the first group of institutions in fall 2018 to discuss the goals and timeline of the project. Residents began to design new corequisite courses and worked with their CTLs to deliver professional training to other instructors on campus.

- In fall 2018, the first group of faculty members participated in training for new or expanded corequisite courses; by spring 2019, the first group of colleges offered new corequisite courses taught by the faculty that were trained in fall 2018. Meanwhile, residents continued to mentor the instructors who were teaching the new courses.
- In spring 2019, another group of faculty participated in training for new or expanded corequisite courses on their campuses.

In total, almost 150 math and 175 English faculty at the six Wave 1 campuses participated in professional training sessions in the first year. By fall 2019, faculty trained in spring are expected to teach the new or expanded corequisite courses, while the faculty trained in fall 2018 will continue to teach. Faculty residents will also convene the instructors periodically to examine student outcomes and identify gaps in order to foster continuous improvement. Meanwhile, as more trained instructors continue to teach corequisite courses, enrollment in traditional developmental education courses will decrease over time.

Similarly, in March 2019, the second wave of faculty residencies were selected and in April some had site visits by the MIT. The next steps will be for Wave 2 residents to design new corequisite courses if needed and then work with their CTLs to design intensive training for other instructors on campus.

**“The work of creating, editing, and implementing corequisite courses has been the most challenging and most rewarding aspect of my career thus far. It pushes me to admit my previous misconceptions about how students best learn mathematics and requires me to improve my teaching methods in the classroom. Furthermore, I now have a better understanding of how a systems perspective can enhance everything I do as an educator.”**

*-AJ Stachelek, Math Professor, Hostos Community College/Math Innovation Team member*

## Convening Opportunities

In order to support this process, a number of opportunities for networking and professional development have been developed. For example, at the beginning of the project, CUNY hosted systemwide summits that brought together faculty, instructors, campus leaders, and staff to discuss the project within the context of broad developmental education reform.

- The first Math Summit was held in April 2018, with the goal of discussing CUNY’s developmental education reforms overall, and

then focusing on corequisites in particular. About 70 math faculty were invited as well as several national experts.

- The first English Summit in October 2018 was co-hosted with BMCC with 80 attendees and was positively received, leading to another English Summit at City Tech in April 2019 with more than 300 faculty, instructors, campus leaders, and staff.

**“The Strong Start to Finish grant has given me the opportunity to share what has been successful at BMCC to help other schools build their accelerated mathematics programs. It is wonderful to know that I am contributing to development of accelerated programs and impacting thousands of students across the City.”**

*-Susan Licwinko, Math Professor, Borough of Manhattan Community College/  
Math Innovation Team member*

In addition, CUNY hosted the first Evidence and Equity Forum (subsequently renamed the CUNY Math Corequisite Summit) for all colleges to review outcomes and share their experiences of corequisite

math course development. Participants included the Math residents from all colleges as well as members of MIT and the CUNY-SSTF leadership team.

**“My experiences at LaGuardia Community College were an incredible launchpad that allowed me to go on to complete a bachelor’s degree and then master’s degree in data science. I know firsthand how valuable a good experience in a first college math course can be and I am happy to be working on the Strong Start to Finish project at CUNY to expand access to the most effective courses for more students.”**

*-Andy Rojas, Strong Start to Finish Data Analyst*

## Training and Communication Materials

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As part of the project, standardized training and communication materials are being created for advisors and students so that they fully understand the various developmental education options. These tools will help advisors to guide freshmen toward appropriate developmental education interventions. At the same time, campus advisement experts will be working across the campuses to make sure entering students understand their developmental education options and create an academic plan, with the expectation that they complete their gateway math and English courses by the end of their first year. Colleges will continue to provide guidance to students and academic advisors about new courses and encourage students to register on a regular basis.



# Successes, Challenges and Lessons

## Successes to Date

According to CUNY-SSTF project team leaders, the early success in expanding corequisite offerings has been helped by the developmental education reforms that CUNY began three years ago. The need for reform has been increasingly understood and prioritized. It was also helped by development of a reform framework that included evidence, and the fact that campus leaders and faculty understand the value.

Collaboration with Complete College America has been critical, as it led to connections with speakers from other state systems who could speak at convenings such as the Math Summit and English Summit. In addition, CUNY is now connected to a network of other states and systems actively engaged in corequisite and other broad reform efforts.

## Challenges

The challenges of working through faculty to develop their own corequisite courses, as opposed to adopting course designs across the whole system, have become increasingly clear as the initiative progresses. In some colleges, there is broad support for corequisite instruction, while in others, only individual faculty have been interested. At some institutions, math faculty were ready but not English faculty, or vice versa.

The decentralized, campus-controlled approach to new course designs has resulted in wide variation in progress between different campuses. Two of the first wave colleges had such significant challenges that they made very little progress over the first year, suggesting that at least some campuses needed stronger guidance, more frequent check-ins, or different forms of communication to keep them on track. In fact, in recent months the project team has started to schedule more check-ins with campus teams and to streamline messaging to faculty,

advisors, students, and other stakeholders. However, it is difficult to find the right balance of support between allowing freedom in the residents' work and providing assistance that is not seen as prescriptive.

## Emerging Lessons

Overall, early findings suggest that making the shift to corequisite instruction needs support from many stakeholders on campus—from faculty to develop the courses, registrars to program the courses into the system, and advisors to guide students toward them. This type of work needs strong support for faculty from administrators. One way to do that is to develop materials/strategies to make campus leadership more aware of the collaboration needed to implement a corequisite approach.

In addition, the project team is beginning to see how different models for corequisite courses can be structured. Some examples include:

- **An existing credit-bearing course paired with a developmental education course where students enroll in both;**
- **An existing course with required workshops; or**
- **A new course with extended hours or other support.**

All of these models have strengths and disadvantages, and can differ in terms of scheduling, advisor awareness, and integration into transfer articulation agreements. CUNY is now encouraging colleges to design offerings that consider student needs, scheduling norms, and other factors on campus.

# Early Outcomes

In the spring of 2018, after a competitive selection process, CUNY was awarded \$2.1 million to implement developmental education reform efforts at scale. CUNY began implementing reform efforts by the fall semester with the goal to increase the number

and proportion of students completing both college-level (gateway) math and English courses in the student's first year of study. The data provided here serve as a baseline against which the progress of the grant may be made.

Figure 1:

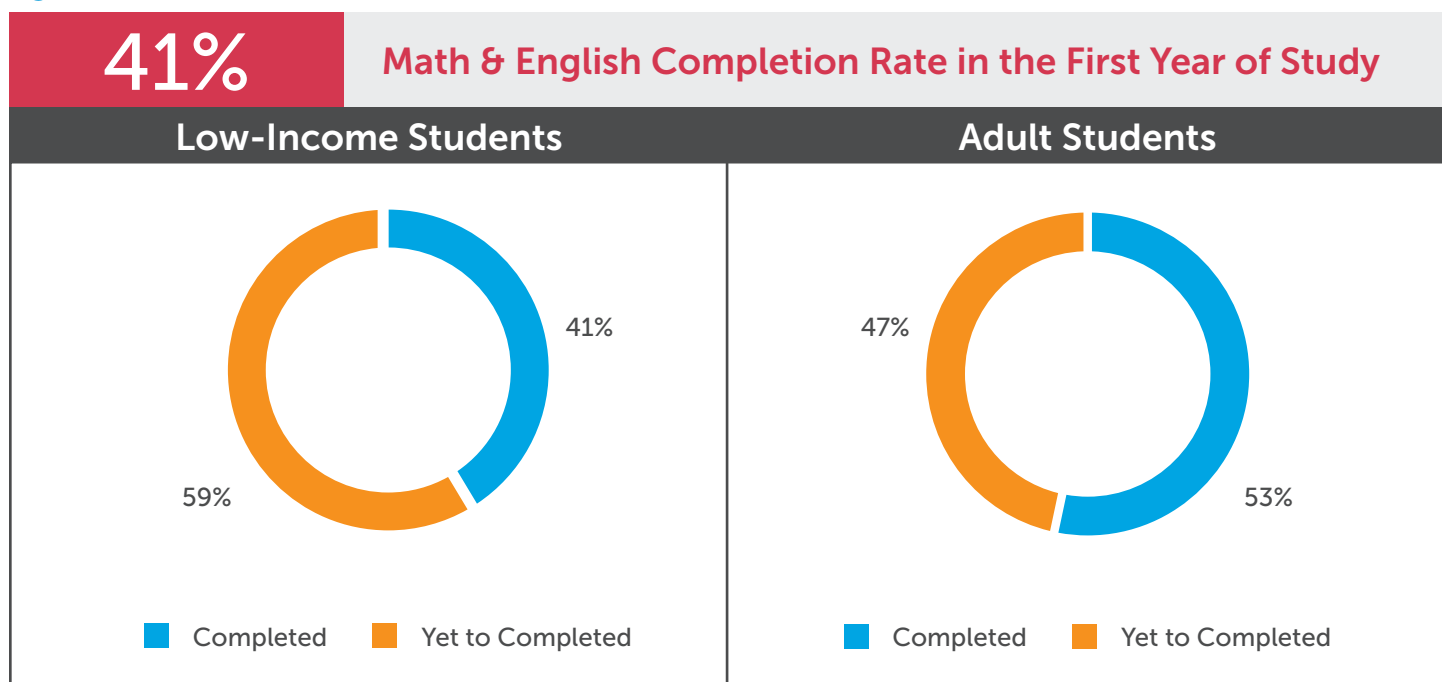


Figure 1. Gateway math & English completion in the first year of study rates overall and for low-income and adult students: Fall 2018 cohort.

For the cohort starting in the fall of 2018, 41% completed a gateway math & English course in their first year of study. Completion rates were 41% for low-income students and 53% for adult students.

Figure 2:

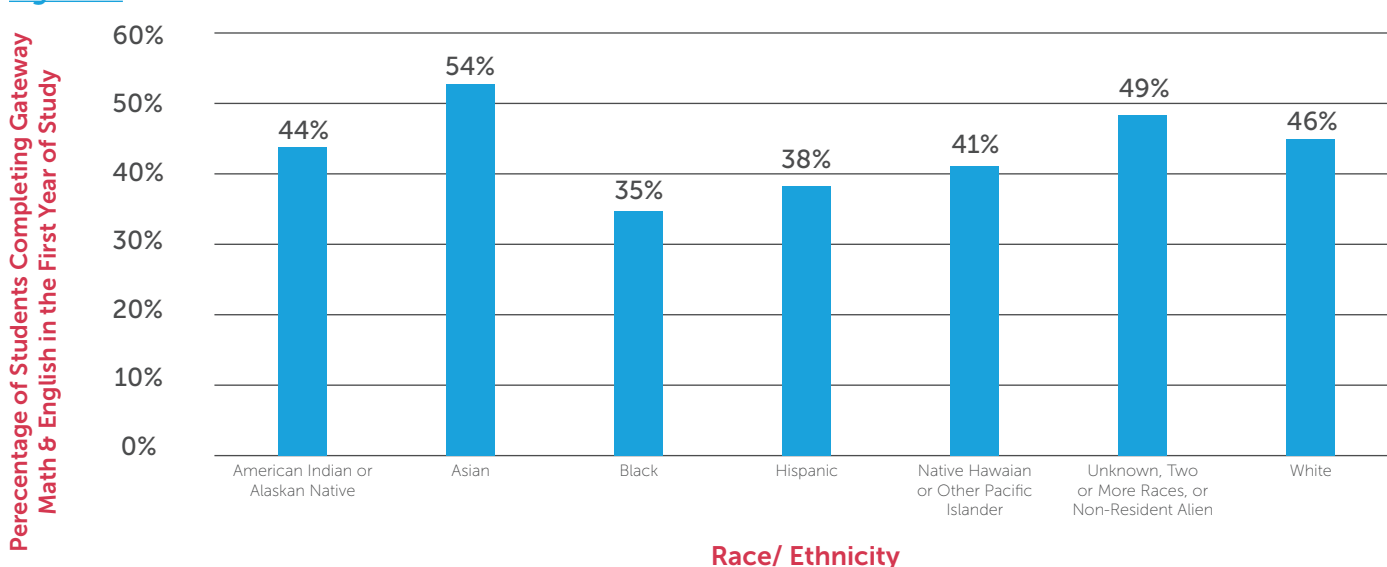


Figure 2. Gateway math & English completion in the first year of study rates by race/ethnicity: Fall 2018 cohort.

When examined by a student's race or ethnicity, completion rates varied for students who identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native (44%); Asian (54%); Black (35%); Hispanic (38%); Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (41%); Unknown, Two or more races or Non-resident Alien (49%); or White (46%).

## Next Steps

The process of faculty residents designing or expanding corequisite courses, developing training with their campus CTLs, and implementing the training for a larger number of instructors will continue through the duration of the project.

### First Wave of Institutions

Trained faculty will continue to teach the new corequisite courses, and residents will convene the instructors to review student outcomes from the new courses, especially to identify any gaps. Colleges will encourage students to register for corequisite courses and update advisors on new course offerings. This cycle of trained instructors teaching new courses will continue over time, gradually reducing enrollment in traditional developmental courses.

### Second Wave of Institutions

Faculty residents began working with their CTLs to design intensive training for instructors on their campus. The first group of instructors participated in training in fall 2019. By spring 2020, the second wave colleges offered new corequisite courses, taught by faculty trained in fall 2019; at the same time another group of faculty would participate in training and then would teach the new or expanded courses in fall 2020.

## Convening to Share Experiences

The CUNY-SSTF project leadership also plans to host another Evidence and Equity Forum/CUNY Math Corequisite Summit in fall 2020, delayed from the originally planned spring date because of the coronavirus shutdown, to bring all colleges together to review the outcomes and experiences through this process.

By the end of the CUNY-SSTF project, traditional standalone developmental education courses will gradually be eliminated, replaced by corequisite instruction or pre-matriculation programs throughout the system. This should enable increased completion rates in English and math gateway courses and contribute to improving CUNY students' overall progress toward transfer or a postsecondary credential.