CUNY celebrates first graduate from new program
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Piotr Tandek recently graduated John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan with a bachelor’s degree that he completed in two years.

The 19-year-old Brooklyn native, whose parents are from Poland, started at John Jay with 12 credits from high school, but it was his enrollment in a City University pilot program that helped him finish so quickly, saving time and slashing the amount of loans he had to take out, Tandek said. “I saved $18,000 by graduating early.”

Tandek is the first graduate of CUNY’s Accelerate, Complete and Engage (ACE) program, piloted at John Jay, which provided him with additional financial and academic assistance, including an adviser who helped him navigate course requirements, getting him set up with summer and winter courses and an internship.

“Going into college is overwhelming and with this program ... it helps you transition,” Tandek said. “They boost you up. They set the standards for you ... It helps us excel,” he said of the ACE program.

Tandek’s story — though a bit unique because of the credits he earned in high school — is one CUNY hopes to replicate at other four-year colleges through the ACE program as it seeks to improve on-time graduation rates, chancellor James Milliken said.

“This culture of completion is a focus at each of our colleges and it is a central point of our strategic plan, of where we’re going to be focusing attention and resources in the coming years,” Milliken said in an interview. “Getting students college ready, into CUNY, [and] getting them out in a timely way with degrees.”

The move comes as college affordability and student debt have been at the center of the national discussion on higher education.

ACE is a spinoff of CUNY’s nationally renowned Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which focuses on increasing the three-year graduation rate for students looking to earn an associate’s degree. U.S. Rep. Yvette Clarke of Brooklyn introduced a bill last month that would create a national version of the ASAP to support students attending community colleges nationally.
ASAP was launched as a pilot in 2007 with 1,100 students across six campuses and as of the 2016-17 school year has expanded to 15,400 students across nine of CUNY’s colleges, including its six community colleges and three comprehensives that offer associate and bachelor’s degrees, said Donna Linderman, who oversees the program. It is supported through funding from the state and New York City.

ACE, like ASAP, provides an array of support services for students, including ongoing academic and career development counseling, free unlimited MetroCards, a $500 textbook voucher each year, and scholarships toward summer and winter courses.

Most ACE students attend tuition-free. They must take at least 15 credits a semester and are required to complete internships.

The first cohort of the ACE pilot at John Jay began in fall 2015 with 262 students. The retention rate at the end of the fall 2016 semester was 83 percent, compared with 78 percent for similar students. Of those retained, 95 percent of ACE students were in good academic standing, according to CUNY data.

And a higher percentage of ACE students are on track to graduate within four years, with 71 percent at or above 45 cumulative credits earned compared to 43 percent of the comparison group as of the end of the fall 2016 semester, according to CUNY.

An additional 350 students entered the program in fall 2016, Linderman said. “The early outcomes are so promising, with significantly more students on track to graduate at the four- or five-year level,” she said.

The goal is to graduate at least 50 percent of ACE students within four years and 65 percent within five years.

But the program doesn’t come without a cost to the college.

ACE currently costs about $4,000 per student per year over and above what it costs for regular full time equivalent students services, Linderman said. This includes having more advisers, as well as paying for the additional tuition, books and transportation aid. The ACE program currently is funded through the Robin Hood Foundation, Office of the Mayor’s NYC Opportunity, and the Jewish Foundation for the Education of Women.

But even though its more expensive per student, it actually costs less per degree than if the student were to take additional years to graduate, and allows the college to graduate twice the number of students, she said.

CUNY currently is looking into a sort of public-private partnership to fund the ACE program at additional schools, Linderman said.
While there is an additional cost, it’s an “investment worth making,” Milliken said. "If it is successful, which we believe it will be, then yes, we will look at ways to expand that across CUNY."

“The goal is not obviously just to increase enrollment. The goal for us at CUNY and at all large public universities, is to make sure that those students are successful,” he said. “That’s something where I don’t think we’ve had enough focus in recent decades and so we’re going to turn that around at CUNY.”