



June 2003

# **OPENING DOORS**

## **INFORMATION FOR SITES AND FUNDERS ON ACTIVITIES IN 2003**

### **What is “Opening Doors”?**

MDRC is launching this ambitious demonstration initiative designed to help nontraditional students — at-risk youth, low-wage working parents, and unemployed individuals — earn college credentials as the pathway to better jobs with higher pay. The objective of Opening Doors is to work with a group of three to five states and several community colleges in each state to design, implement, and evaluate bold new forms of financial aid, enhanced student services, and curricular and instructional innovations. These interventions are geared to address two vexing problems for nontraditional students: their high drop-out rates and the long time it takes them to complete community college programs. Opening Doors is structured to improve retention and accelerate credit accumulation, so that students stay in school long enough to earn credentials. Besides helping to design and implement the Opening Doors programs, MDRC will be conducting a comprehensive evaluation to measure the program interventions’ effects on a broad range of educational, labor market, and personal development outcomes over a three-year follow-up period.

### **Why is Opening Doors important?**

The reasons for undertaking the Opening Doors demonstration are compelling:

- Economists estimate that, by 2006, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require levels of education and skills that are beyond a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> Yet 40 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds have not earned even a high school diploma or a GED certificate, and 65 million adult workers lack a postsecondary credential.

---

<sup>1</sup>Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers, *Getting Down to Business: Matching Welfare Recipients’ Skills to Jobs That Train* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1999, p. 7).

- The National Center for Education Statistics reports that more than 40 percent of community college students leave school without obtaining a degree. In fact, up to 75 percent of low-income students who start a community college degree or certificate program either drop out or fail to complete the program within five years. In urban colleges, 70 percent of students must take remedial classes before advancing to credit programs, and most never complete these prerequisites. There is also the problem of “drift”: A high percentage of students sample classes and exhaust their financial aid before declaring a major or choosing an occupational certificate program.
- Low-wage workers who lack a postsecondary credential are likely to have limited opportunities for career advancement and wage progression. Low-paying jobs are often associated with high rates of employee turnover, and with employment that is often intermittent, at nontraditional hours, and without a fixed schedule. These jobs often provide limited fringe benefits or no benefits at all.
- There is a correlation between earning an Associate’s degree and higher earnings. One study found that men with an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree earned 18 percent more, and women with an A.A. earned 23 percent more than their counterparts, who were high school graduates.<sup>2</sup> Another study suggested even higher returns from further postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup>
- Despite tight funding in most states, the policy environment is ripe for experimentation and the testing of new ideas at community colleges. These institutions are uniquely positioned throughout the country to respond at scale to the educational needs of unemployed individuals, at-risk youth, and low-wage workers. Community colleges have become more sensitive to the needs of low-income populations and employers, and they are adapting course offerings to accommodate them. They are demonstrating a greater interest in integrating their academic, remedial, and workforce development missions; and they are solidifying and building new relationships with the education, workforce development, and welfare systems.
- Opening Doors is particularly relevant to the workforce, welfare, and higher education systems — all of which share a common interest in increasing the opportunities for career mobility and wage progression among low-income Americans. Earning a college credential may be a means toward this goal. The comprehensive, multifaceted evaluation that is proposed for Opening Doors will build knowledge about the policies and strategies that are most effective, and it will help lay the groundwork for expansion through best-practice recommendations and legislation. Findings from Opening Doors are likely to inform state policy, as well as such important federal legislation as reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the Higher Education Act, and the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act.

---

<sup>2</sup>W. Norton Grubb, *Learning and Earning in the Middle: The Economic Benefits of Sub-Baccalaureate Education* (New York: Community College Research Center, April 1999, pp. 14-15).

<sup>3</sup>Thomas J. Kane and Cecilia Elena Rouse, “Labor-Market Returns to Two- and Four-Year Colleges,” *American Economic Review* 85 (3): 600-614.

## **How will states and colleges be selected for the Opening Doors project?**

The following major criteria will be used in selecting three to five states and colleges in each state to test innovative approaches to improving nontraditional students' access to and retention in community college programs:

- The alignment of state workforce, welfare, and higher education policies to make innovation possible at the community college level
- The commitment and capacity of the community colleges to design and implement innovative policies and programs that can be rigorously evaluated
- The commitment to participate in a multifaceted evaluation and to make administrative records available for analysis
- Funding from the mainstream public systems to support the innovative programs being tested (with modest funding supplements from MDRC through a challenge-grant structure)

## **What are some of the innovative policies and practices that could be implemented and evaluated in the Opening Doors project?**

Opening Doors will study community college programs that employ innovative strategies in one or more of the following three areas (which were identified in the project's exploratory phase) to help nontraditional students stay in school and obtain a credential:

### **New forms of financial aid**

Low-income students' persistence in postsecondary education can be improved by addressing issues of college affordability and access to financial aid. Ideas include providing financial aid in simple and flexible ways, helping students navigate through the aid application process, and offering supplemental forms of aid that fill gaps in coverage to further reduce the direct cost of attending school. New financial aid packages include providing some assistance for students who are working but have income below 200 percent of poverty and miss the cut-off for Pell grant eligibility to enroll less than half time, during the summer, or in remedial courses. We expect that these financial aid strategies will both improve retention and persistence and may attract students who otherwise would not have considered enrolling in community college.

### **Enhanced student services**

Strengthening and expanding student services can help address the complex, diverse needs of nontraditional students who must balance school, work, and family responsibilities. Toward that end, Opening Doors will assign a point person with a relatively small caseload to meet with students at specified intervals and provide some services and broker access to others. Services could include help in navigating the college system, academic advisement and tutoring, personal and career counseling, job placement, mentoring, peer support, transportation assis-

tance, and child care (especially during evening and weekend hours). Programs may also provide access to such work-based safety net supports as food stamps, medical insurance, and child care subsidies for those who qualify.

### **Curricular or instructional innovations**

Opening Doors will enrich the academic curriculum by offering more stimulating and engaging credit-granting developmental education classes that integrate remediation with occupational training in high-growth occupations. Also under consideration is the development of more flexible course formats, including changes to curricula that shorten program duration, the use of on-line self-paced coursework, or the creation of sequences of stand-alone modules that provide early exit points with interim credentials.

### **Where did these ideas come from?**

For the past two years, MDRC staff have reviewed research; visited many community colleges; and, with the National Governors Association, convened a forum involving officials from state workforce, welfare, and community college systems. Staff have also conducted focus groups with current, former, and potential students at nine colleges to gain first-hand insights on the factors that in their experience affect retention and persistence. Emerging findings from this exploratory research were presented at AACC conferences with community college officials, at workforce development conferences, and in meetings with higher education associations and congressional staff.

The following reports and papers completed on Opening Doors can be downloaded from MDRC's Web site ([www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)):

- *Opening Doors: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Workers*. 2001. Susan Golonka and Lisa Matus-Grossman. New York: MDRC.
- *Opening Doors to Earning Credentials: Impressions of Community College Access and Retention from Low-Wage Workers*. 2001. Lisa Matus-Grossman and Susan Gooden. New York: MDRC.
- *Opening Doors: Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family, and College*. 2002. Lisa Matus-Grossman and Susan Gooden. New York: MDRC.
- *Supporting CalWORKs Students at California Community Colleges: An Exploratory Focus Group Study*. 2003. Rog air Purnell and Laura Nelson. New York: MDRC.
- "Welfare Reform and Community Colleges: A Policy and Research Context." 2002. Thomas Brock, Lisa Matus-Grossman, and Gayle Hamilton. In *New Directions for Community Colleges*. New York: Jossey-Bass and ERIC Clearinghouse.

### **What are the benefits of participating in the Opening Doors project?**

The states and community colleges that are selected to participate in the Opening Doors project will benefit from opportunities to:

- Join a select group of colleges in a state-of-the-art national evaluation.
- Interact with other participating states and colleges through learning-exchange forums.
- Receive technical assistance from MDRC and its partner organizations.
- Gain national recognition for implementing innovative programs.
- Inform federal and state policy and practice and, if warranted by the research findings, help lay the groundwork for future expansion.
- Receive modest funding to provide program enhancements and compensate research-related costs from MDRC through a challenge-grant structure.

### **What are the components of the Opening Doors evaluation?**

The proposed evaluation will feature an impact study using a random assignment design to measure reliably the new Opening Doors programs' effects on educational and labor market outcomes and other measures of individual and family well-being. Over a 15-month period, between 1,500 and 2,000 students will be enrolled in the research sample in each participating state. Fifty-five percent of the research sample will be randomly assigned to the Opening Doors group, and 45 percent will be assigned to a control group, which has access to the community college but not to the special slot-limited Opening Doors services. MDRC will compare the experiences of the Opening Doors group to the control group over a three-year period.

This impact study will be complemented by an implementation study that will describe how the Opening Doors programs operate, identify promising recruitment strategies and other best practices, and capture the experiences of staff and students in these special programs. The evaluation will also include a benefit-cost analysis.

MDRC will work with local stakeholders to customize the programs and research designs in ways that satisfy local priorities and build a consensus of support for the study. Periodic reports will be produced, and all participating colleges will have the opportunity to review drafts before publication. MDRC attaches high priority to disseminating the findings, so the results are likely to have prominent visibility among government policymakers, college administrators, and the press.

Among the outcomes to be studied are:

- **Community college course enrollment, retention, and completion**, including number of courses enrolled in, number of courses completed, and number of credits completed. The study will also determine the proportion of each research group that transfers from a remedial to a credit program, and the proportion that completes an academic or vocational program;
- **Attainment of community college certificates or degrees;**

- **Employment and earnings**, including outcomes such as job quality, work hours, wages, and work-related benefits. The study will also measure individual and household income and determine the sources of that income;
- **Transfer to four-year colleges and universities**;
- **Family structure**, such as sample members' marital status and childbearing behavior;
- **Peer networks and social connectedness**, including choices of friends and changes in peer groups over time; and reliance on peers for information about education, career, and other life choices;
- **Health outcomes** such as smoking, binge drinking, drug and alcohol use, knowledge about health, and violent behavior; and
- **Civic engagement**, which includes outcomes such as voting and other political behavior.

### **What is the timetable for the Opening Doors project?**

Recruitment of states and colleges began in 2002. MDRC hopes to begin implementation and evaluation activities in September 2003. Subject to resource availability, additional states and colleges may be phased in during the following year. Data collection, analysis, report production, and dissemination activities will continue through 2008.

### **Which colleges were selected in 2003?**

Kingsborough Community College, serving the borough of Brooklyn in New York City, has designed a program that would include two Opening Doors components: increased financial aid and innovative curricular reform. It is a test of the new, small, intensive Learning Communities that help new students get through remedial classes and into regular college courses combined with in kind financial support in the form of books for coursework. The services would include block scheduling that allows the same cohort of 25 students to take three courses together during their first semester. The three courses include a college orientation course, and a remedial English and core academic course whose curricula have been integrated. In addition to the block scheduling, a case manager/counselor will be assigned to the cohort and will provide advisement, counseling, and coordinate tutoring, extending beyond the first semester.

Lorain County Community College, situated in an industrial county just west of Cleveland, has designed a program that would include two Opening Doors components: increased financial aid and enhanced student services. The financial aid component would provide a flexible stipend that could be used to cover any costs not already covered by federal, state, or college assistance, including books, fees, meals, transportation, and child care. The enhanced student services component delivers more intensive and comprehensive student sup-

ports from a team of staff that would include an academic advisor, a career counselor, a personal counselor, a financial aid advisor, and a tutor, one of whom would be the “point-person” for each student.

### **Who are the affiliated organizations?**

MDRC expects to work with the following organizations to select participating states and colleges, flesh out the program’s components, advise on the evaluation design, and disseminate the findings:

- The American Association of Community Colleges
- The American Council of Education
- The Community College Research Center at Columbia Teachers College
- FutureWorks
- Jobs for the Future
- The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on the Transition to Adulthood
- The National Governors Association

### **What are MDRC’s responsibilities?**

MDRC will provide overall management of the project and offer technical assistance along with partner organizations to make the interventions robust and of high quality. It will also conduct a multifaceted evaluation to measure the effects of the interventions on a broad range of educational and labor market outcomes; understand the programs’ implementation; and disseminate the findings to inform public policy, improve practice, and, if warranted by the research, stimulate Opening Doors’ expansion.

### **Who is funding the Opening Doors project?**

Support for the Opening Doors Demonstration has come from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, Robin Hood Foundation, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. MDRC has proposals pending at the Departments of Education and Labor, WT Grant Foundation and the National Institutes of Health.

### **Contact information**

Robert Ivry: (212) 340-8672; [robert.ivry@mdrc.org](mailto:robert.ivry@mdrc.org)

Melissa Wavelet: (212) 340-8605; [melissa.wavelet@mdrc.org](mailto:melissa.wavelet@mdrc.org)