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## Changing Courses

### Instructional Innovations That Help Low-Income Students Succeed in Community College

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Jobs for the Future

In recent years, interest has grown in the role of community colleges in helping low-skill and low-income individuals advance out of poverty and toward self-sufficiency.<sup>1</sup> In part, this interest is a reaction to the shortcomings of traditional workforce and adult education programs.<sup>2</sup> It also reflects the impressive efforts of innovative community colleges to focus resources and leadership attention on strategies to improve postsecondary attainment, persistence, and program completion for lower-income working adults.

MDRC's Opening Doors to Earning Credentials project and its early reports echoed the conclusions of Norton Grubb, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, and others regarding the potential of community colleges — that community colleges are the local educational institutions with the greatest potential for helping low-wage workers earn skills and credentials that lead to both educational and career advancement.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Opening Doors identified serious obstacles to realizing that potential, including the characteristics of the low-wage workforce, the institutional structure and priorities of most community colleges, and the external policy environment in which they operate.

MDRC has identified three strategies that might enable colleges to be more effective in helping working adults obtain college credentials. These are: (1) financial incentives that can address the high cost of college for low-income individuals; (2) student supports that can help working adults cope with academic, personal, and other problems that often result in their dropping or stopping out; and (3) program and curricular innovations and redesign that can cope with the severe time constraints, skill needs, and job advancement hopes of working adults.

MDRC asked Jobs for the Future to look at curricular and program redesign strategies being used in community colleges today to speed advancement from lower levels of skill into credential programs and to shorten the time commitment that earning a credential demands of students. This paper presents a framework for understanding the range of experimentation with program and class reformatting and redesign. It identifies programs that exemplify promising approaches. The paper concludes with issues and questions that MDRC will need to address in assessing whether to proceed with a research program focused on program redesign efforts geared to working adults' needs.

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<sup>1</sup>Low-wage workers are defined here as those who earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. This includes current and former welfare recipients, long-term unemployed, adults with low literacy skills or limited English language proficiency, incumbent workers in dead-end, low-wage jobs, and young adults who lack high school diplomas.

<sup>2</sup>Basic skills programs include remedial or developmental programs in community colleges, adult basic education (ABE) programs, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, General Educational Development (GED) programs, and alternative programs for out-of-school youth.

<sup>3</sup>Grubb, 2001; Kazis, 2002; Jenkins, 2002.