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The Opening Doors Demonstration

Promoting Student Success in Community College and Beyond

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Accessible and affordable, community colleges are gateways to postsecondary education, offering students new ways to achieve personal and economic goals. However, many students who begin courses at community colleges end them prematurely. In an effort to confront this problem, the Opening Doors Demonstration is testing the effects of community college programs that are designed to increase student persistence and achievement. The programs include various combinations of curricular reform, enhanced student services, and increased financial aid.

This report describes the background, objectives, and design of MDRC's evaluation of Opening Doors. Six community colleges are participating in the project: Kingsborough Community College (New York), Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College (Ohio), Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson (Louisiana), and Chaffey College (California). These are mostly large, well-established community colleges that offer a range of associate's degree programs and technical or vocational programs. The six colleges make up four Opening Doors study sites, each implementing a unique intervention:

1. Kingsborough: In small learning communities, groups of incoming freshmen take classes together and receive vouchers to cover the costs of their books.
2. The Ohio colleges: New and continuing students who have completed no more than 12 credits receive enhanced counseling/guidance and a small scholarship.
3. The Louisiana colleges: Low-income students who have children under age 18 receive a scholarship that is tied to academic performance; ongoing counseling provides an opportunity to discuss goals and progress and to arrange for tutoring or other help.
4. Chaffey: Probationary students take a College Success course and receive individualized assistance in reading, writing, or math.

The Opening Doors evaluation is the first random assignment study of programmatic interventions in community colleges — making it the most scientifically rigorous test of whether these enhanced programs can make a difference. In addition to examining short-term impacts on course completion, grades, and certificates or degrees from community college, the evaluation will determine whether Opening Doors participants experience longer-term improvements in rates of transfer to four-year colleges and universities and in employment, earnings, personal and social well-being, health, and civic participation. Finally, the study will provide an in-depth investigation into the implementation and cost of Opening Doors programs and into the perceptions and experiences of community college students and faculty in the study sites. A series of publications is planned between 2005 and 2009 to inform education policy and practice.