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Building Learning Communities

Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College

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A postsecondary credential is becoming a prerequisite for admission to the American middle class. Community colleges, with their open admissions, convenient locations, and relatively modest cost, serve as the gateway to postsecondary education for many low-income and disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, many students enter community college with low basic skills and leave before earning a credential.

In the Opening Doors project, MDRC and its research partners are working with six community colleges to test special programs designed to increase student persistence and achievement and, in the longer term, labor market success. Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York — a fairly large college with a diverse student population that includes many immigrants — is testing a program called Opening Doors Learning Communities. The program has served about 750 students. It targets freshmen, most of whom failed one or more of the reading, writing, and math skills tests that all incoming students must take.

Kingsborough's Opening Doors Learning Communities program places participating freshmen into groups that consist of up to 25 students each. Each group forms a learning community, a cohort that takes three first-semester courses together: English (usually at the remedial level), a course on another academic subject, and a one-credit freshman-orientation course. The instructors, including a counselor who teaches the freshman orientation course, work as a team to integrate the courses (for example, by giving joint assignments), meeting regularly during the semester to review student progress and to devise success strategies for students having problems. Each learning community's counselor works with students to address any obstacles to regular attendance and academic success. Students in the learning communities also receive extra tutoring and a voucher to purchase books.

Kingsborough freshmen who agree to participate in the Opening Doors study are assigned, through a lottery-like process, to the learning communities program or to a control group that takes regular unlinked courses and is eligible for standard counseling and tutoring. Opening Doors is the first evaluation of a community college program to use this rigorous research design. Analysis of transcripts for the first group of students to enter the study in fall 2003 show that:

- **Opening Doors students substantially outperformed control group students during their first semester at Kingsborough**, achieving higher course pass rates, particularly in English.

- **One year after enrollment, Opening Doors students were more likely to have completed their remedial English requirements.** Among students who had failed both the reading and writing skills tests prior to enrollment, 33 percent of Opening Doors students had retaken and passed both tests one year later, compared to just 14 percent of control group students. Surprisingly, however, Opening Doors students were no more likely than control group students to be enrolled at Kingsborough (or elsewhere in the City University of New York) one year later.

These early results are not the final word on the Kingsborough program. They include only about one-fourth of the students in the study and primarily reflect the experiences of students who participated in the learning communities program during its start-up semester. Future reports will include results for a larger group of students over a longer follow-up period.