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## Paying for Persistence

### Early Results of a Louisiana Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents Attending Community College

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Community colleges play a critical role in American higher education. Because they have open admissions policies and relatively low tuition and fees, they are particularly important to the millions of adults who might lack preparation or otherwise be unable to afford college. At the same time, longitudinal research suggests that nearly half of students who begin at community college do not obtain a degree or enroll in another college or university within six years. Many factors explain the low rate of persistence, including the expense of attending college. Despite financial aid, most low-income students have substantial unmet needs. In 1999-2000, the average community college student receiving a Pell Grant (the primary need-based financial aid program) had an unmet need of over \$3,000, taking into account Pell and all other federal and state aid received.

This report presents the early results of a program in Louisiana designed to help low-income parents attending community college cover more of their expenses and also provide a financial incentive to make good progress. The program, known as Opening Doors, operated at two New Orleans-area institutions — Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson — in 2004-2005, before Hurricane Katrina devastated the region. The colleges offered students a \$1,000 scholarship for each of two semesters, or \$2,000 total, if they maintained at least half-time enrollment and a 2.0 (or C) grade point average. The scholarships were in addition to Pell Grants and any other financial aid for which students qualified and were paid in installments so that college counselors could verify that students stayed enrolled and passed their courses. Most of the program's participants were women who are single parents.

MDRC and its research partners evaluated the Louisiana Opening Doors program using a random assignment research design. Low-income parents who met program eligibility criteria were randomly assigned to two groups: a *program group* that received the Opening Doors scholarship and counseling or a *control group* that received whatever regular financial aid and counseling was available to all students. Random assignment ensured that the motivation levels and personal characteristics of students in both groups were equivalent at the start of the study. By tracking both groups over time, researchers could measure the difference, or *impact*, that Opening Doors had on student outcomes. Analysis of transcripts for students who entered the study in spring and summer 2004 shows that, compared with the control group, students in Opening Doors:

- **Were more likely to enroll in college full time**
- **Passed more courses and earned more course credits**
- **Had higher rates of registration in college in the second and third semesters after random assignment**

While it is too early to conclude that the Louisiana Opening Doors program is an unequivocal success, these early findings suggest that a performance-based scholarship can have a significant positive effect on persistence and academic achievement among low-income parents. Future reports will present program impacts for the full sample on a wider array of measures, including degree completion, transfer, employment, and well-being. Researchers will also investigate how students in Louisiana coped after Hurricane Katrina.