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A Whole 'Nother World

Students Navigating Community College

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Each year thousands of young people begin their college careers in community colleges. The lower cost, more convenient location, and flexible admissions standards of community colleges make them an attractive educational alternative for many students, especially those from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, persistence toward degrees among community college students is low. Family responsibilities, poor academic performance, and weak ties to faculty and other students get in the way of students' educational aspirations.

MDRC's Opening Doors Demonstration is measuring the effects of various combinations of curricular reforms, enhanced academic advising, and increased financial aid intended to increase the persistence and improve the academic achievement of students at six community colleges across the United States. To determine the impact of the Opening Doors interventions, the study uses a random assignment design. Students are assigned either to a program group that participates in special classes or receives Opening Doors services or to a comparison group that benefits only from the regular classes and services the college offers to all students.

This qualitative study, a complement to the Opening Doors impact evaluation, asked students about the factors that affect their ability to persist in community college. Interviews with a small sample of 47 students from both program and comparison groups, most between the ages of 18 and 25, were conducted at two Opening Doors campuses, Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, and Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. The program at Lorain provided enhanced advising services, while the program at Kingsborough used small learning communities to assist participating students. In the winter of 2005, students discussed their preparation for college, academic performance, family and work responsibilities, and connections to faculty, staff, and other students. The key findings are:

- Many younger students (20 and under) reported they attended college largely to please their parents and did not feel a strong personal motivation. In contrast, many students between 21 and 25 said they enrolled to escape low-wage work and ultimately provide a higher standard of living for their families.

- Parenting responsibilities of students with children often interfered with their ability to study and attend class using a traditional schedule.
- Making friends in college was only marginally important to interviewed students.
- At Lorain, the individualized academic advising the program group students received helped them avoid some pitfalls experienced by comparison group students, such as overloading their course schedules.
- At Kingsborough, program group students, who participated in classes with coordinated curricula, reported higher levels of personal attention on assignments from instructors than did comparison group students in traditional classes.