

## **Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration in Ohio**

April 2007

Community colleges enroll nearly half of all higher education students nationwide; with relatively low tuition and open admissions policies, they are a vital pathway to better jobs and higher earnings for many individuals. Unfortunately, only about a third of those who entered a community college in 1995-1996 had earned a degree or certificate six years later. Students who are juggling school, work, and family obligations face substantial challenges in completing their education, and inadequate student support services and insufficient financial aid can impede their progress. In 2003, MDRC and a consortium of funders launched the Opening Doors demonstration to test reforms in six community colleges aimed at helping students stay in school and earn credentials.

Two MDRC reports present early results from two similar Opening Doors programs in Ohio, at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, outside Cleveland, and Owens Community College in Toledo. MDRC is evaluating the programs using a random assignment research design. Students were assigned in a lottery-like process either to a program group that received Opening Doors services or to a control group that received the college's standard services.

The Opening Doors program at Lorain, which operated from 2003 to 2006, and at Owens, which operated from 2004 to 2006, provided enhanced student services and a modest scholarship to participating students for two semesters. Students were assigned to one of a team of advisers, with whom they were expected to meet frequently to discuss academic progress and issues that might affect their schooling. Students in the Opening Doors program received a \$150 scholarship each semester (for a total of \$300), which was paid after required advising sessions. Students in the control group received the college's standard advising services and were not eligible for the special scholarship. The program at both schools served students whose family income was below 250 percent of the federal poverty level and who were either incoming freshmen or returning students who had completed fewer than 13 credits and had a history of academic difficulties.

The Opening Doors intervention, with relatively small advising caseloads, was designed to allow more intensive, personalized, and comprehensive advising than what students would typically receive at the colleges. Each adviser at Lorain worked with no more than 110 students; at Owens, advisers' caseloads were no more than 185. In contrast, students in the control group in both schools had access to advisers as needed at a walk-in center, which employed one adviser for roughly every 1,000 students.

### **What Did the Studies Find?**

Analysis of student transcript data for the first three of five groups, or cohorts, of students in the study at Lorain and for the entire research sample of three groups at Owens shows that at both colleges, students in the Opening Doors program were more likely than students in the control group to reenroll in college after one semester. It is important to note, however, that the magnitude of the impacts on enrollment at Lorain was nearly double that found at Owens. Also in contrast to the results at Owens, program group students at Lorain saw improvements in some select academic outcomes, including credits earned and courses passed. At Owens, students in the program registered for more credits but, because they were more likely to withdraw from at least one course, they did not earn any more credits than students in the control group.

While it is too soon to draw final conclusions, there was a common pattern in the early results at both schools. The positive effects on enrollment and course registration rates at both Lorain and Owens were short-lived and disappeared once the Opening Doors program ended.

### **What Do the Results Mean?**

These reports do not represent a complete and conclusive examination of the Opening Doors programs at Lorain and Owens. Future reports on the Ohio programs will present results for the full research sample at both colleges, track academic outcomes over a longer follow-up period, and present results on a wider array of measures, including degree completion, transfer, employment, and well-being. It will also compare implementation of the programs at the two colleges.

The next reports may shed more light on why the results of the interventions were not larger and more enduring. It is possible that the program needed to last longer than two semesters. It is also possible that the difference between the services that the program and control groups received were not substantial enough to produce large, lasting effects. Finally, it may be that the package of enhanced student services with a modest scholarship was not enough.

Another Opening Doors program offers an interesting contrast. Two community colleges in the New Orleans area operated a program for low-income parents that provided modestly enhanced advising and a much larger scholarship than the Ohio colleges: \$1,000 per semester for two semesters, tied to maintaining at least half-time enrollment and a 2.0 grade point average. The Louisiana program produced much larger impacts on students' outcomes than the programs at Lorain and Owens, and the effects continued after the program ended. The emerging findings from these Opening Doors studies suggest that the greater value of Louisiana's scholarship, combined with the performance expectations, may be a more winning formula.