

March 2008

A Good Start

Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College

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Over the past few decades, a postsecondary credential has become increasingly important in the labor market, and college attendance has become more common. Unfortunately, however, many students leave college before receiving a degree, particularly those who are academically underprepared for college-level work. Many postsecondary institutions operate learning communities to promote students' involvement and persistence in college. Learning communities typically place groups of students in two or more linked courses with mutually reinforcing themes and assignments. They seek to build peer relationships, intensify connections to faculty, and deepen understanding of coursework. While learning communities are increasingly popular, little rigorous evidence on their effects exists.

As part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York — a large, urban college with a diverse student population that includes many immigrants — operated one such learning community program. The program placed freshmen in groups of up to 25 who took three classes together during their first semester: an English class, usually at the developmental level; an academic course, such as health or psychology; and a one-credit orientation course. The program provided enhanced counseling and tutoring as well as a voucher for textbooks.

Using a rigorous research design, MDRC assigned 1,534 freshmen, at random, either to a program group that was eligible for the learning community or to a control group that received the college's standard courses and services. Analyses in this report show that:

- **The program improved students' college experience.** Students in the program group felt more integrated and more engaged than students in the control group.
- **The program also improved some educational outcomes while students were in the learning community program, but the effects diminished in subsequent semesters.** Program group students, for example, attempted and passed more courses and earned more credits during their first semester.

- **The program moved students more quickly through developmental English requirements.** Students in the program group were more likely to take and pass English skills assessment tests that are required for graduation or transfer.
- **The evidence is mixed about whether the program increased persistence.** Initially the program did not change the rate at which students reenrolled. In the last semester of the report's two-year follow-up period, however, slightly more program group members than control group members attended college.

These results are not the final word on Kingsborough's program: MDRC plans to continue tracking sample members' outcomes for at least another year.