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OPENING DOORS UPDATE

What is “Opening Doors”?

MDRC has launched an ambitious demonstration initiative called Opening Doors that is designed to help nontraditional students — at-risk youth, low-wage working parents, and unemployed individuals — earn college credentials as the pathway to better jobs and further education. The project is geared to address two vexing problems for nontraditional students: their high attrition rates and the long time it takes them to complete community college programs. In Opening Doors, MDRC is working with a group of five pioneering community college sites to design, implement, and evaluate bold new programs that are structured to improve retention, accelerate credit accumulation, and increase degree attainment. The project focuses on three program components: supplementary financial aid, enhanced student services, and curricular and instructional reforms. A comprehensive evaluation is measuring the Opening Doors programs’ effects on a broad range of educational, labor market, and personal development outcomes over a three-year follow-up period.

Who is participating in Opening Doors?

MDRC selected five community college sites in four states for Opening Doors: Kingsborough Community College in New York, Lorain County and Owens Community Colleges in Ohio, Delgado Community and Louisiana Technical Colleges (a collective site) in Louisiana, and Chaffey College in California. Kingsborough, which operated from the fall of 2003 through the summer of 2005, took more than 1,500 students into the study. Lorain County and Owens, which were launched in the fall of 2003 and 2004, respectively, have enrolled more than 1,400 students in their research samples. The Louisiana colleges began operating in the spring of 2004 and have since enrolled more than 1,000 students in the research sample. Chaffey ran a pilot this spring and will start its study in the fall.

Why is Opening Doors important?

The reasons for undertaking the Opening Doors demonstration are compelling:

- Economists estimate that, by 2006, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require levels of education and skills that are beyond a high school diploma.¹ Yet 40 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds have not earned even a high school diploma or a GED certificate, and 65 million adult workers lack a post-secondary credential.
- The National Center for Education Statistics reports that more than 40 percent of community college students leave school without obtaining a degree. In fact, up to 75 percent of low-income students who start a community college degree or certificate program either drop out or fail to

¹Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers, *Getting Down to Business: Matching Welfare Recipients’ Skills to Jobs That Train* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1999, p. 7).

complete the program within five years. In urban colleges, 70 percent of students must take remedial classes before advancing to credit programs, and most never complete these prerequisites. There is also the problem of “drift”: A high percentage of students sample classes and exhaust their financial aid before declaring a major or choosing an occupational certificate program.

- There is a correlation between earning an Associate’s degree and higher earnings. One study found that men with an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree earned 18 percent more and women with an A.A. earned 23 percent more than their counterparts who were high school graduates.² Another study suggested even higher returns from further postsecondary education.³
- Despite tight funding in most states, the policy environment is ripe for experimentation and the testing of new ideas at community colleges. These institutions are uniquely positioned throughout the country to respond at scale to the educational needs of unemployed individuals, at-risk youth, and low-wage workers. Community colleges have become more sensitive to the needs of low-income populations and employers, and they are adapting course offerings to accommodate them. They are demonstrating a greater interest in integrating their academic, remedial, and workforce development missions; and they are solidifying and building new relationships with the education, workforce development, and welfare systems.
- Opening Doors is particularly relevant to the workforce, welfare, and higher education systems — all of which share a common interest in increasing the opportunities for career mobility and wage progression among low-income Americans. Earning a college credential may be a means toward this goal. The comprehensive, multifaceted evaluation that is proposed for Opening Doors will build knowledge about the policies and strategies that are most effective, and it will help lay the groundwork for expansion through best-practice recommendations and legislation if warranted by the research.
- Findings from the Opening Doors evaluation will inform the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, especially regarding the issues of affordability and accountability. The findings are also relevant to the Workforce Investment Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act.

What programs are being tested?

Each of the five Opening Doors sites is implementing a unique program that provides at least two of the following three innovations: curricular or instructional reform, enhanced student services, or supplementary financial aid. The programs are described briefly below.

- **Kingsborough Community College** in Brooklyn is testing a program called Opening Doors Learning Communities (ODLC) that targets incoming freshmen during their first semester at college. Participating students are divided into groups of up to 25 each. The students in each group take three linked courses together: an English course (usually remedial), a content course required

²W. Norton Grubb, *Learning and Earning in the Middle: The Economic Benefits of Sub-Baccalaureate Education* (New York: Community College Research Center, April 1999, pp. 14-15).

³Thomas J. Kane and Cecilia Elena Rouse, “Labor-Market Returns to Two- and Four-Year Colleges,” *American Economic Review* 85 (3): 600-614.

for their major, and a one-credit freshman orientation course that is taught by an ODLG counselor. Students also receive enhanced tutoring and vouchers to pay for textbooks.

- **Lorain County Community College**, located just west of Cleveland, is implementing a program centered on enhanced student services that also includes a financial aid component. The study targets low-income students who have completed fewer than 13 credits. Students in the program enjoy easy access to and personal attention from a dedicated program coordinator and a team of advisors with expertise in academic advising, career and personal counseling, and financial aid. Participants also receive \$150 for each of two semesters; the stipend is paid in two installments per semester, following mandatory meetings with an advisor.
- **Owens Community College** in Toledo is operating an Opening Doors program that is similar to Lorain County's and targets the same population.
- **Delgado Community College (City Park and West Bank)** and **Louisiana Technical College (West Jefferson)**, all part of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System in the New Orleans area, have implemented a generous state-funded scholarship targeted to low-income parents. Participating students receive a \$1,000 scholarship for each of two consecutive semesters that is tied to academic performance. Designated counselors meet with students throughout each semester to discuss academic goals, monitor academic progress, and arrange tutoring or other help as needed.
- **Chaffey College** in Rancho Cucamonga will test a two-semester intervention to help students move off academic probation and retain their financial aid. The program, centered on a semester-long orientation/guidance course, will provide instructional and academic support supplemented by academic counseling. The course will be designed to teach students time management, critical thinking, and study skills; link them to available services and resources; and help them develop educational plans. The revamped course will work more closely with the college's subject-specific academic support centers and be integrated with a semester-long sequence of supplemental instruction in reading, writing, and math. The second semester of the program will entail continued advising.

Where did the ideas for the Opening Doors programs come from?

Before beginning the demonstration, MDRC staff reviewed research; visited many community colleges; and, with the National Governors Association, convened a forum involving officials from state workforce, welfare, and community college systems. Staff also conducted focus groups with current, former, and potential students at nine colleges to gain first-hand insights on the factors that in their experience affect retention and persistence. MDRC presented emerging findings from this exploratory research at conferences with community college officials, at workforce development conferences, and in meetings with higher education associations and Congressional staff.

The following reports and papers completed on Opening Doors can be downloaded from MDRC's Web site (www.mdrc.org):

- *Promoting Student Success in Community College and Beyond: The Opening Doors Demonstration*. 2005. Thomas Brock and Allen LeBlanc. New York: MDRC.

- *Building Learning Communities: Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College*. 2005. Dan Bloom and Colleen Sommo. New York: MDRC.
- *Support Success: Services That May Help Low-Income Students Succeed in Community College*. 2004. Rogéair Purnell and Susan Blank. New York: MDRC.
- *Money Matters: How Financial Aid Affects Nontraditional Students in Community Colleges*. 2003. Victoria Choitz and Rebecca Widom. New York: MDRC.
- *Changing Courses: Instructional Innovations That Help Low-Income Students Succeed in Community College*. 2003. Richard Kazis and Marty Liebowitz. New York: MDRC.
- *Supporting CalWORKs Students at California Community Colleges: An Exploratory Focus Group Study*. 2003. Laura Nelson and Rogéair Purnell. New York: MDRC.
- “Welfare Reform and Community Colleges: A Policy and Research Context.” 2002. Thomas Brock, Lisa Matus-Grossman, and Gayle Hamilton. In *New Directions for Community Colleges*. New York: Jossey-Bass and ERIC Clearinghouse.
- *Opening Doors: Students’ Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family, and College*. 2002. Lisa Matus-Grossman and Susan Gooden. New York: MDRC.
- *Opening Doors to Earning Credentials: Impressions of Community College Access and Retention from Low-Wage Workers*. 2001. Lisa Matus-Grossman and Susan Gooden. New York: MDRC.
- *Opening Doors: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Workers*. 2001. Susan Golonka and Lisa Matus-Grossman. New York: MDRC.

What are the components of the Opening Doors evaluation?

The evaluation features an impact study using a random assignment design to measure reliably the new Opening Doors programs’ effects on educational and labor market outcomes and other measures of individual and family well-being. Over a one- to two-year period, between 700 and 1,500 students are being enrolled in the research sample in each participating site. Half of the research sample is randomly assigned to the Opening Doors group, and half is assigned to a control group, which has access to the community college but not to the special, slot-limited Opening Doors services. MDRC is comparing the experiences of the Opening Doors group to the control group over a three-year period.

This impact study is being complemented by an implementation study that will describe how the Opening Doors programs operate, identify promising recruitment strategies and other best practices, and capture the experiences of staff and students in these special programs. The evaluation will also include a benefit-cost analysis.

MDRC worked with local stakeholders to customize the programs and research designs in ways that satisfied local priorities and built a consensus of support for the study. Periodic reports are being produced, and all participating colleges have the opportunity to review drafts before publication. MDRC attaches high priority to disseminating the findings, so the results are likely to have prominent visibility among government policymakers, college administrators, and the media.

Among the outcomes being studied are:

- **Community college course enrollment, retention, and completion**, including number of courses enrolled in, number of courses completed, and number of credits completed. The study is

also determining the proportion of each research group that transfers from a remedial to a credit program and the proportion that completes an academic or vocational program;

- **Attainment of community college certificates or degrees;**
- **Employment and earnings**, including outcomes such as job quality, work hours, wages, and work-related benefits. The study is also measuring individual and household income and determining the sources of that income;
- **Transfer to four-year colleges and universities;**
- **Family structure**, such as sample members' marital status and childbearing behavior;
- **Peer networks and social connectedness**, including choices of friends and changes in peer groups over time; and reliance on peers for information about education, career, and other life choices;
- **Health outcomes**, such as smoking, binge drinking, drug and alcohol use, knowledge about health, and violent behavior; and
- **Civic engagement**, which includes outcomes such as voting and other political behavior.

Who are the affiliated organizations?

Throughout the project's site selection, program development, evaluation, and dissemination phases, MDRC has been conferring with the following organizations:

- The American Association of Community Colleges,
- The American Council of Education,
- The Community College Research Center at Columbia Teachers College,
- FutureWorks,
- Jobs for the Future,
- The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on the Transition to Adulthood,
- The National Governors Association, and
- Princeton University: Industrial Relations Section.

What are MDRC's responsibilities?

MDRC is providing overall management of the project and offering technical assistance along with partner organizations to make the interventions robust and of high quality. We are also conducting a multifaceted evaluation to measure the effects of the interventions on a broad range of educational and labor market outcomes; to understand the programs' implementation; and to disseminate the findings to inform public policy, improve practice, and, if warranted by the research, stimulate Opening Doors' expansion.

Who is funding the Opening Doors project?

Support for the Opening Doors Demonstration has come from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, George Gund Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Joyce Foundation, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health, MacArthur Research Network on the Transition to Adulthood, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, Princeton University: Industrial Relations Section, Robin Hood Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Labor.

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