

Executive Summary

OPENING DOORS

COMMENCEMENT DAY

Six-Year Effects of a Freshman
Learning Community Program at
Kingsborough Community College

Colleen Sommo
Alexander K. Mayer
Timothy Rudd
Dan Cullinan

July 2012

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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with

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Overview

In today's economy, postsecondary credentials are increasingly important to labor market success. Community colleges provide a key pathway to these credentials for many, including low-income and nontraditional students. Unfortunately, many community college students leave before earning a degree or credential, especially those who enter underprepared for college-level work.

As part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York — a large, urban college in the City University of New York (CUNY) system — tested a one-semester learning community program. The program placed freshmen into groups of up to 25 students who took three classes together during their first semester: a developmental or college-level English course, an academic course required for the student's major, and a freshman orientation course. It also provided enhanced counseling and tutoring as well as text-book vouchers.

MDRC is using a random assignment research design to study the effects of the Opening Doors Learning Communities program, compared with Kingsborough's standard services and courses. An earlier MDRC report followed the students in this study for two years and found that the program improved students' college experience and some short-term educational outcomes. This report extends the follow-up through six years after students entered the program and examines whether the program led to long-term academic success. Key findings include:

- The Opening Doors Learning Communities program increased the proportion of students who earned a degree by 4.6 percentage points after six years.
- The Opening Doors Learning Communities program is cost-effective. In particular, the cost per degree earned was lower per program group member than it was per control group member.

This report provides evidence that learning communities with enhanced supports can affect community college students' short- and long-term academic success. These improvements are particularly noteworthy, given the short duration and cost-effectiveness of the program. This analysis, however, may not be representative of the effects of learning communities more generally. Another MDRC report on findings from the Learning Communities Demonstration, released by the National Center for Postsecondary Research, looked at three semesters of follow-up at six learning community programs targeted to developmental education students and generally found only modest short-term results.

Several factors, however, distinguish the Opening Doors Learning Communities at Kingsborough. Most notably, they were particularly comprehensive. They linked three courses and provided enhanced services; some of the services extended into the trailing summer or winter intersession. In addition, the research sample had important distinguishing characteristics. The program explicitly recruited students intending to enroll in college full time and included both developmental and college-ready English students. The Opening Doors program also had unusually strong support from the college leadership. Therefore, while the Kingsborough results are encouraging, it is not clear that its positive impacts can be readily replicated at other institutions.

Preface

Learning communities are a popular instructional reform community colleges are using to help students succeed academically. Small cohorts of students are placed together in two or more thematically linked courses, usually for one semester. The theory is that the relationships formed among students and with instructors and the connections between the linked courses will enhance students' engagement with school and their mastery of the subject matter, making it more likely that they will complete their courses, stay in college, and graduate.

As part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration and random assignment evaluation, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York — a large, urban college in the City University of New York (CUNY) system — tested a one-semester learning community program. Groups of up to 25 students took three classes together during their first semester: a developmental or college-level English course, an academic course required for the student's major, and a freshman orientation course. The program also provided enhanced counseling and tutoring as well as textbook vouchers. An earlier MDRC report followed the students in this study for two years and found that the program improved students' college experience and some short-term educational outcomes.

With six years of follow-up, this report demonstrates that the Opening Doors Learning Communities at Kingsborough had a 4.6 percentage point impact on graduation rates. The program was also cost-effective — the cost per degree earned was lower per program group member than it was per control group member. These encouraging findings suggest that a well-implemented one-semester learning community program, with additional supports, can have important long-term effects. However, Kingsborough's program may not be typical. A new report from the Learning Communities Demonstration (published by the National Center for Postsecondary Research and MDRC), which tested learning communities for developmental students at six institutions, found only modest short-term impacts. As this report describes, the Opening Doors Learning Communities program at Kingsborough was unusually comprehensive; it included three courses, rather than two, and recruited both developmental and college-ready students who intended to enroll in college full time. These differences, as well as others, may account for Kingsborough's stronger results.

At the end of the day, this study is one of the first to demonstrate that a comprehensive, short-term intervention can substantially improve the academic trajectory of community college students — no small feat when only a third of first-time students who enroll in community colleges earn a degree or certificate within six years.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

The long-term follow-up at Kingsborough Community College, presented in this report, was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant No. R305A100066-11 to MDRC. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. We are very appreciative of the Institute's generous support.

The original work on the Opening Doors demonstration received support from a number of foundations and government agencies, which are listed at the front of this report. We are grateful for their generous backing and ongoing commitment. We particularly thank the Robin Hood Foundation, which provided special funding to support the Opening Doors program at Kingsborough Community College. We also owe special thanks to the members of the MacArthur Foundation-funded Network on Transitions to Adulthood, our research partners on Opening Doors, who helped us conceptualize the study and participated in the design of the 12-month survey.

We are also grateful to the many administrators, faculty, and staff at Kingsborough who have made Opening Doors a success. There is not enough space to mention everyone who has played a role in the program and the study, but we particularly want to acknowledge some individuals. Byron McClenney, who was the president of Kingsborough through 2003, decided to join the Opening Doors project, and his leadership was crucial in successfully launching the program. Interim President Fred Malamet continued to support the project during his tenure. Current President Regina Peruggi, whose tenure began in the fall of 2004, enthusiastically championed Opening Doors and worked to expand the program to serve most of the college's freshmen. Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Stuart Suss and former Dean of Student Services Norman Toback provided valuable support and assistance throughout the project.

Rachel Singer, former Director of Academic Affairs, and Peter Cohen, Associate Dean for Student Affairs, were terrific partners from the inception of the project. Their dedication and passion were inspirational and invaluable. Additionally, current Director of Academic Affairs Marissa Schlesinger was an insightful and informative partner to us as this analysis neared completion. The Opening Doors faculty, coordinators, and case managers brought the program model to life. We cannot mention them all by name, but faculty members Marcia Babbitt, Rebecca Arliss, Kate Garretson, and Barbara Walters deserve special recognition for their contribution. The Opening Doors coordinators, Barbara Fairweather and Susan Richards, and the case managers, Nora Bitá and Zuleika Rodriguez, operated the program day to day. All these individuals contributed in valuable ways to the research as well.

Several people were instrumental in providing student transcript and test score data to MDRC over the course of the study. Special thanks are due to Dean Richard Fox, Linda Biancorosso, Anatoly Shvartsman, and Habibe Ilingi. Finally, Dean Loretta DiLorenzo has also made valuable contributions to the project, as have Cindy Ho, Katherine Wu, Sally Ricottone, and Jeanine Graziano-King.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to the Opening Doors project and to this report. Shane Crary-Ross and former MDRC employee Katherine Morriss coordinated the report production process, created exhibits, and conducted fact-checking. Elijah de la Campa and Melvin Gutierrez assisted with the programming of the data. Gordon Berlin, Rob Ivry, Thomas Brock, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Dan Bloom, Sue Scrivener, John Hutchins, Mary Visher, Mike Weiss, Evan Weissman, and Victoria Deitch all provided thoughtful reviews of earlier drafts of the report. In addition, the MDRC Education Studies Committee offered helpful feedback and suggestions on an earlier version of the report. Margaret Bald edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell and David Sobel prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the hundreds of students who participated in the study at Kingsborough and, in particular, those who answered surveys or participated in interviews or panel discussions. We hope that the findings from Kingsborough and the other sites in Opening Doors will be used to improve college programs and services for them and others in the future.

The Authors

Executive Summary

In today's economy, postsecondary credentials are increasingly important to labor market success. Community colleges provide a key pathway to these credentials for many, including low-income and nontraditional students. Unfortunately, many community college students leave before earning a degree or credential, especially those who enter underprepared for college-level work. Among first-time students who enrolled in community colleges during the 2003-2004 academic year, only about a third earned a degree or certificate in six years.¹

In 2003, MDRC launched the Opening Doors demonstration, in which six community colleges operated innovative programs aimed at increasing students' achievement and persistence. As part of this demonstration, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York — a large, urban college in the City University of New York (CUNY) system — tested a one-semester learning community program, with enhanced supports, from 2003 to 2005. The program targeted freshmen, most of whom needed developmental (or remedial) English, based on their scores on skills assessment tests.

An earlier MDRC report followed the students in this study for two years and found that the program improved students' college experience and some short-term educational outcomes. This report extends the follow-up through six years after students entered the program and examines whether the program led to long-term academic success. The main finding from this report is: The Opening Doors Learning Communities program increased the proportion of program group students who earned a degree after six years.

Opening Doors Learning Communities Program Model

The Opening Doors Learning Communities model at Kingsborough had several components:

- **Linked courses and student cohorts.** Groups of up to 25 students took three linked courses together during the first semester, or “program semester,” forming a learning community. The linked courses consisted of an English course, either college-level or developmental, an academic course required for the student's major, and a one-credit freshman orientation course.
- **Faculty collaboration and instructional practices.** Faculty who taught linked courses were given one hour of reassigned time, allowing them to

¹U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2011. *Web Tables — Community College Student Outcomes: 1994-2009* (NCES 2012-253). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

meet regularly during the semester to discuss students' progress and identify strategies to assist students having difficulty. This extra time was also meant to allow faculty to integrate their course curricula and coordinate assignments.

- **Student supports.** The Opening Doors Learning Communities program included some other components designed to address students' barriers to retention in college and academic success:
 - **Enhanced counseling and support.** An Opening Doors counselor (called a "case manager") taught the freshman orientation course that was part of the learning community. Typically, each Opening Doors case manager was responsible for three or four learning communities (75 to 100 students in all). The case managers worked proactively to help students overcome obstacles and develop strategies for success in college, and were expected to meet regularly with the other faculty members in a learning community to identify students who might be in need of assistance.
 - **Enhanced tutoring.** Each learning community in the program was assigned a tutor, who attended the English course and, in many cases, the subject matter course as well. The hope was that by attending courses, tutors would become familiar with the course material and the students.
 - **Textbook vouchers.** Students in the program group were given a \$150 textbook voucher for the initial 12-week main session and a \$75 textbook voucher for the subsequent six-week winter or summer intersession.² The vouchers were redeemable at the campus bookstore.

Evaluation and Research Sample

MDRC is using a random assignment research design to study the impacts (or effects) of the Opening Doors Learning Communities program, compared with Kingsborough's standard services and courses. Opening Doors was the first large-scale evaluation to use random assignment to study community college programs.

²During the 2003-2004 academic year, the textbook vouchers were worth up to \$200 during the 12-week session and up to \$100 during the six-week session.

Kingsborough targeted its Opening Doors Learning Communities program to students who met the following criteria:

- Was a first-time incoming freshman who planned to attend college full time during the day
- Did not test into English as a Second Language (that is, tested into either developmental English or college-level English)
- Was age 17 to 34

Students who met all of the eligibility criteria and were interested in participating in the research study were randomly assigned either to a program group that was eligible to participate in Opening Doors Learning Communities or to a control group that received standard college courses and services.

Short-Term Findings

An earlier MDRC report followed the students in this study for two years.³ The report included an implementation analysis, findings from a 12-month student survey, and impacts on academic outcomes for two years.⁴ To very briefly summarize, the key short-term findings include:

- **The Opening Doors Learning Communities program was well implemented.**

All the key features were in place and remained in place throughout the study period. However, there was variation in content, class size, and the degree to which the faculty worked together and integrated their courses. Thus, the study provides a strong test of the structural features of the learning community, but it may not fully detect the effects of tightly integrating course curricula.

- **The program improved some educational outcomes during the program semester, and the program group remained ahead on some key outcomes at the end of two years.**

The program group experienced a significant “boost” on important academic measures during the program semester. For example, the program group earned an additional 1.2 credits,

³Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo with Jenny Au, Jedediah J. Teres, and Susan Yeh. 2008. *A Good Start: Two Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College*. New York: MDRC.

⁴Academic outcomes from the two-year report were based on courses taken at Kingsborough only.

on average, and was more likely to make progress through their developmental English requirements. While increases in credits earned slowed after the program semester, the program group increased their lead in this domain and was ahead by 2.4 credits, on average, after two years (representing about an 8 percent increase in credits earned over the control group). All of these differences are “statistically significant,” meaning they are not likely due to chance.

In addition, based on results from the student survey, assignment to the program group significantly improved a student’s college experience in terms of a sense of integration and belonging, suggesting that learning communities change a student’s perceptions of the college experience.

Long-Term Findings

Looking at academic measures for six years shows that the program affected long-term outcomes as well. The key findings from this report are:⁵

- **More students in the program group earned a degree than students in the control group after six years.**

After six years, 35.9 percent of the program group earned a degree from any institution, compared with 31.3 percent of the control group. The 4.6 percentage point gain represents about a 15 percent increase in degrees earned over the control group rate. As discussed below, the program also influenced credit accumulation and some dimensions of enrollment, which may have led to the increase in degrees earned. The effect on degrees was most evident for students who placed into college-level English, although there is evidence that the program also positively affected long-term outcomes for students with the greatest developmental needs in English.

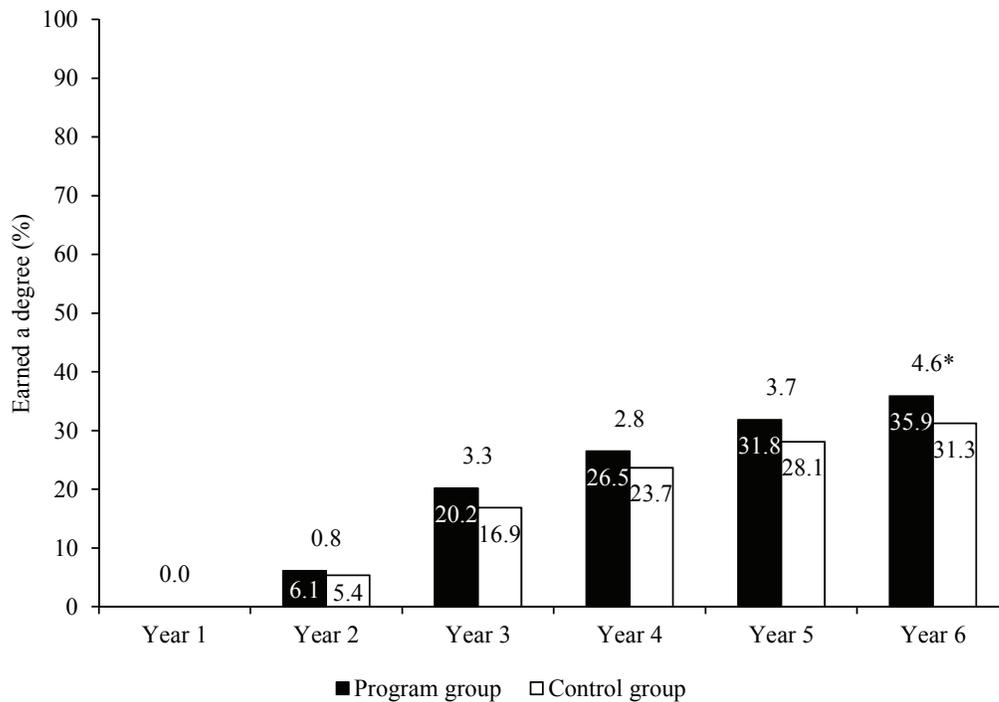
Figure ES.1 shows cumulative degree receipt rates for the full sample by research group, by year. The black bars represent the program group mean and the white bars represent the control group mean. As illustrated, both groups began earning degrees in year 2, with a large jump occurring in year 3. The pattern of differences between the program group and the control group suggests that the program group was earning degrees at a higher rate throughout the follow-up period, though this difference is not statistically significant until year 6.

⁵The long-term outcomes use National Student Clearinghouse and CUNY Institutional Research Database (IRDB) data for the impact analysis. Measures that report on credits or intersessions are based on CUNY data only.

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure ES.1

Earned a Degree at Any College, Years One Through Six Kingsborough Community College Six-Year Follow-Up Report



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from CUNY Institutional Research Database (IRDB) and National Student Clearinghouse data.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Estimates are adjusted by research cohort. Standard errors are clustered by learning community link.

No one with a known degree type earned a certificate, although there may have been a small number of certificate earners whose degree type was unknown.

- **The program had a positive impact on total credits earned over the follow-up period.**

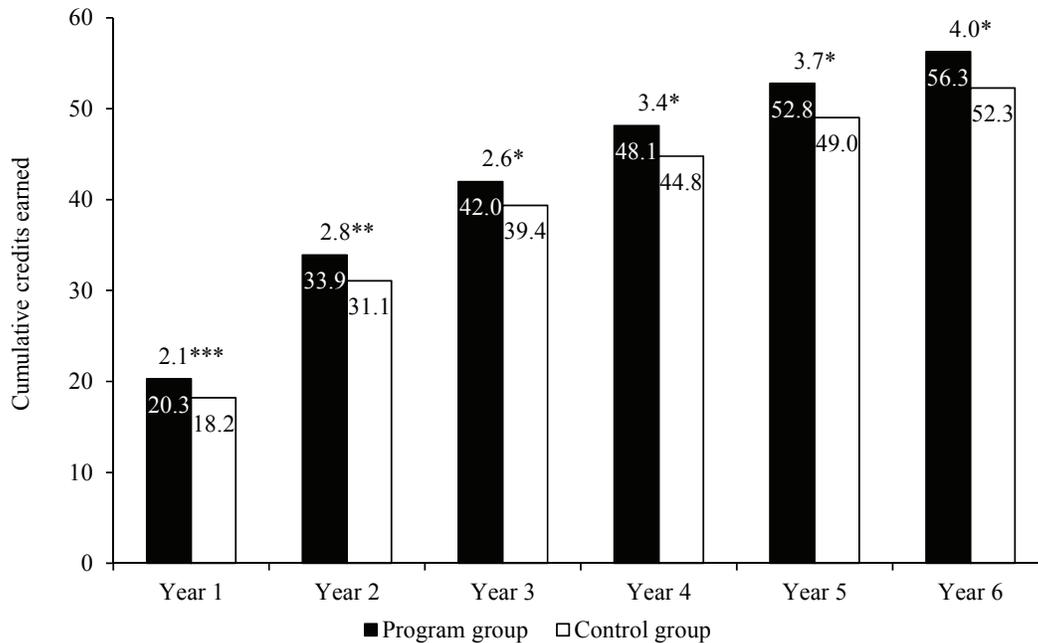
Figure ES.2 compares the annual growth in cumulative total credits earned for the program and control groups, an important indicator of academic success. As shown, the opportunity to participate in the Opening Doors Learning Communities led to immediate short-term gains in credit accumulation, and these gains persisted throughout the six-year follow-up period.

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure ES.2

Cumulative Credits Earned at Any CUNY College, Years One Through Six

Kingsborough Community College Six-Year Follow-Up Report



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from CUNY Institutional Research Database (IRDB).

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

Cumulative credits include both college-level and developmental credits.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Estimates are adjusted by research cohort. Standard errors are clustered by learning community link.

During the first year, students in the program group earned significantly more credits than students in the control group, earning on average 20.3 credits compared with 18.2. The impact on credits earned continued to grow over the follow-up period, though at a slower annual rate. By the end of year 6, students in the program group earned an average of 56.3 credits, while students in the control group earned an average of 52.3 credits, yielding a statistically significant impact of 4 credits.

- **The program positively affected persistence during the first four years of follow-up. After six years, the estimated impact on persistence is no longer statistically significant.**

After six years, the difference between the program and control group on number of semesters enrolled in any college is small and not statistically significant. However, statistically significant differences were evident in the first four years. In addition, the program group was more likely to enroll continuously.⁶ This impact was evident as early as the students' first year in college, and persisted for many years. There was no evidence of the program affecting transfer rates to four-year colleges.

- **The program had a positive impact on student enrollment and credit accumulation in summer and winter “intersessions.”**

At Kingsborough, all students can enroll in courses during six-week intersessions that follow the main fall and spring sessions. Most students who enroll full time during a main session — regardless of their assignment to the program or control groups — can enroll in the subsequent intersession at no additional cost. Beginning in year 1 and continuing throughout the follow-up period, the program group enrolled in more cumulative intersessions and earned more credits during these periods, on average, compared with the control group. About a quarter of the overall impact on credits earned after six years came from credits earned during intersessions.

The increase in intersession enrollment may be related to the program model. Some components of the program, such as enhanced counseling and the use of textbook vouchers, were available for the full first semester, including the subsequent intersession. It is possible that these services, plus advice and encouragement from the Opening Doors case managers, enticed more program group students to give intersessions a try and eventually realize their value.

- **The Opening Doors Learning Communities program was cost-effective. In particular, the cost per degree earned was lower per program group member than it was per control group member.**

During the program semester, the Opening Doors Learning Communities program cost just under \$1,600 per program group member to operate. This investment proved worthwhile: It increased the number of students who earned a college degree. Although more total money was spent on students in the program group, the impact on degrees more than offset these costs. The cost per degree earned among program group members was 2.6 percent less than the cost per degree earned among control group members. As a result, the learning communities program was a cost-effective enhancement to the usual college services at Kingsborough.

⁶Sample members are considered “continuously enrolled” if they enrolled in all available semesters through the end of a given year without “stopping” out, or if they had earned their first degree by the given year, after having been continuously enrolled before they earned that degree.

Conclusions and What's Next

The Opening Doors Learning Communities program at Kingsborough was designed to promote student involvement, persistence, and academic success by placing groups of students in learning communities for one semester and offering them enhanced supports. This report finds that the program increased students' six-year graduation rates by an estimated 4.6 percentage points and increased the total credits they earned over six years by an estimated 4.0 credits. The gain in degrees earned marks a substantial improvement, particularly given the relatively short duration of the program.

This analysis, however, may not be representative of the effects of learning communities more generally. The National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR) — of which MDRC is a partner — evaluated six learning communities programs that were selected to represent a variety of programs as typically offered by community colleges across the country. A final report looked at three semesters of follow-up for students in developmental education who participated in the study at five of the six Learning Communities sites, plus a subset of the Opening Doors Learning Communities sample presented here (that is, those in need of developmental English).⁷ The report finds that the developmental education learning communities evaluated had a small (half-credit) impact on credits earned in the targeted subject (English or math), no impact on credits outside that subject, and a half-credit effect on total credits earned. There was no effect on semester-to-semester persistence.

Several factors distinguish the Opening Doors Learning Communities at Kingsborough. Most notably, Opening Doors Learning Communities were particularly comprehensive. They linked three courses and provided enhanced counseling, tutoring, and textbook vouchers, and some of these services extended into the trailing intersession. In addition, the Opening Doors Learning Communities research sample had important distinguishing characteristics. For example, the evaluation explicitly recruited students intending to enroll in college full time and included both developmental and college-ready English students. The Opening Doors program also had unusually strong support from the college leadership. Therefore, while the Kingsborough results are encouraging, it is not clear that the positive impacts can be readily replicated at other institutions.

This report also demonstrates the importance of long-term follow-up for evaluating community college programs in two ways. First, it shows that it is possible for short-term, modest impacts to grow into important long-term gains. Over the first two years, the impact on

⁷Mary Visher, Michael Weiss, Evan Weissman, Timothy Rudd, and Heather Wathington with Jedediah Teres and Kelley Fong. 2012. *The Effects of Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Education: A Synthesis of Findings from Six Community Colleges*. New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research.

credits earned grew slowly, and it was unclear whether the program would lead to long-term academic gains. However with the ability to analyze six years of follow-up data, it is apparent that this program did lead to a very important outcome: increase in degree receipt. Second, as shown in Figure ES.1, the differences in degree receipt between the program and control groups grew over time but did not reach statistical significance until year 6. An important implication of this report is that relatively long follow-up periods may be necessary to identify interventions that have an impact on graduation, particularly for students who enter college with developmental education needs.

MDRC will continue to follow the Opening Doors Learning Communities research sample. A future report will present findings on longer-term academic outcomes, including seven-year graduation rates, and earnings and employments effects.

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About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

