



OPENING DOORS

# MORE GUIDANCE, BETTER RESULTS?

Three-Year Effects of an Enhanced Student Services  
Program at Two Community Colleges

Susan Scrivener  
Michael J. Weiss

AUGUST 2009

**mdrc**  
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY  
■



## Executive Summary

Since the mid-1960s, access to higher education has expanded dramatically, and community colleges have played an increasingly important role. Today, community colleges — which are accessible and affordable, relative to four-year institutions — enroll more than one in every three postsecondary education students.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, among students who enroll in community colleges with the intent to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution, only 51 percent achieve their goal within six years.<sup>2</sup> Institutional barriers, including inadequate student services, can impede community college students' academic progress. Student-to-counselor ratios at community colleges are often more than 1,000 to 1, limiting the assistance that students receive.<sup>3</sup>

This report presents results from a rigorous study of a program that provided enhanced student services and a modest stipend to low-income students at two community colleges in Ohio. The program was run as part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration, which tested different programs to help students succeed in community college. At Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College, students in the Opening Doors program were assigned to one of a team of counselors, with whom they were expected to meet at least two times per semester for two semesters to discuss academic progress and resolve any issues that might affect their schooling. Each counselor worked with far fewer students than the regular college counselors did, which allowed for more frequent, intensive contact. Participating students were also eligible for a \$150 stipend for two semesters, for a total of \$300.

To estimate the effects of the program, MDRC randomly assigned students either to a program group, whose members were eligible for the Opening Doors services and stipend, or to a control group, whose members received standard college services and no Opening Doors stipend. Any subsequent substantial differences between the two groups in academic and other outcomes can be attributed to the program.

In summary, the key findings from this report are:

---

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Provasnik and Michael Planty, *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the 2008 Condition of Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Gary Hoachlander, Anna Sikora, and Laura Horn, *Community College Students: Goals, Academic Preparation, and Outcomes* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Norton W. Grubb, *'Getting into the World': Guidance and Counseling in Community Colleges* (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2001), 6.

- **The Ohio colleges successfully delivered enhanced student services and a modest stipend to participating students.** Program group students reported receiving more academic advising, financial aid advising, and other student services, compared with control group members. Approximately 9 of every 10 program group members received at least one stipend payment.
- **The program improved academic outcomes during the second semester that students were in the study.** Program group students registered for classes at a higher rate than did control group students and earned an average of half a credit more during the second semester. The registration impact is likely primarily the effect of Opening Doors services provided during the first semester, since registration for the next semester typically occurred before the semester actually began. The program did not substantially affect outcomes during the first semester.
- **The program increased registration rates during the first “postprogram” semester — that is, the semester after the program’s enhanced counseling services ended. The program did not, however, meaningfully affect academic outcomes in the subsequent semesters.** The program did not significantly increase the average number of credits that students earned during the first semester after the program ended or over the study’s three-year follow-up period.

## How Was the Program Evaluated?

To understand how the Opening Doors program was implemented, MDRC staff interviewed many Lorain and Owens administrators, faculty, and staff. MDRC also analyzed data from the colleges about the Opening Doors counseling and stipends, and data from a survey that was administered to study participants about a year after random assignment.

To estimate the effect, or “impact,” of the Opening Doors program, MDRC assigned students at the two colleges, at random, to either a program group or a control group. The study tracked both groups over time, using transcript data from the colleges, to determine whether the program improved academic outcomes for students. Random assignment ensures that the characteristics, including motivation levels and demographic characteristics, of students in the program group and control group are similar when a study begins; hence, any subsequent substantial differences in outcomes can be attributed to the program. This study, therefore, is estimating the *value added* of the Opening Doors program, above and beyond what students normally receive.

## Whom Did the Programs Serve?

Lorain and Owens targeted students for their Opening Doors program who were between 18 and 34 years old, had family income below 250 percent of the federal poverty level, had a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and were either beginning freshmen *or* continuing students who had completed fewer than 13 credits and had experienced academic difficulties (indicated by not passing courses or withdrawing from courses). The program was open to both part-time and full-time students.

Over a period of several semesters, a total of 2,139 students were randomly assigned for the study in Ohio — 1,073 in the program group and 1,066 in the control group. About 42 percent of the sample members are from Lorain and 58 percent are from Owens.

Approximately three-fourths of the sample members are women. Fifty-four percent of the sample members identified themselves as white, 30 percent as black, and 11 percent as Hispanic/Latino. With an average age of 24 (at the point of random assignment), the sample is somewhat older than a traditional college-going population. Many sample members are single parents, balancing family responsibilities with school. Roughly half were employed when they entered the study and about the same proportion lived in a household that received government benefits for families with income below the federal poverty level.

## How Was the Program Implemented?

Lorain County Community College, which is in Elyria, a midsized city west of Cleveland, began operating the Opening Doors program during fall 2003. Owens Community College, in Toledo, started a year later. Both colleges operated the program through spring 2006. Lorain and Owens operated their Opening Doors program to its full extent during the fall and spring semesters. Some students in the program group received assistance from Opening Doors during the summer semester, but the services were far less intensive.

The key findings on the implementation of the Opening Doors program follow.

- **The colleges provided Opening Doors counseling services that were more intensive, comprehensive, and personalized than the colleges' standard services.**

The Opening Doors counselors each worked with far fewer students than did other counselors at the colleges. Over the course of the study, Lorain's Opening Doors program had the equivalent of one full-time counselor for every 81 students participating in the program in a given semester. At Owens, the corresponding number was 157. For the control group, the ratio of students to counselors or advisers at the colleges was more than 1,000 to 1.

Program group members were assigned to an Opening Doors counselor. The Opening Doors counseling sessions that MDRC observed covered a range of issues, including course selection, registration, financial aid, other financial issues, tutoring, work-based learning efforts, juggling school and work, career aspirations, and personal issues. The Opening Doors counselors provided intensive assistance themselves, and referred students to other services on and off campus. Both colleges designated staff in the financial aid office to serve as a special liaison for students in the Opening Doors program.

Control group members were not assigned to a counselor, but could seek help from a counselor or adviser on their own. In contrast to the counseling provided to Opening Doors students, the counseling that control group members received tended to be short-term and focused only on academic issues. Data from the study's 12-month survey show that the program increased the frequency with which students received academic advising, financial aid advising, and other student services.

- **The Ohio colleges implemented the Opening Doors stipend component as designed. About 9 of every 10 program group members received at least one stipend payment.**

Program group students were eligible for a \$150 stipend per semester for two semesters, which they could use for any purpose. The stipend's primary function was to promote contact between students and their counselor. It was paid in two installments each semester, after scheduled counseling meetings. A total of 89.3 percent of the program group members received at least one stipend payment, and 45.9 percent received the full \$300.

- **The implementation analysis suggests that the Opening Doors program was somewhat more intensive at Lorain than at Owens.**

As noted above, average caseloads were lower for Lorain's Opening Doors counselors than for their counterparts at Owens. Data from the programs suggest that students at Lorain may have had more contact with their Opening Doors counselor than students at Owens. A higher proportion of the program group members at Lorain than at Owens received at least one stipend payment, and a higher proportion received the full \$300.

## **Did the Program Make a Difference?**

The first two semesters that each student was in the study, during which time Opening Doors services were provided to the program group, are called the "first program semester" and the "second program semester." The semesters that followed are called "postprogram semesters." Each sample member, regardless of the time of random assignment, was followed

up for six consecutive semesters — two program semesters and four postprogram semesters — over a period of three years.

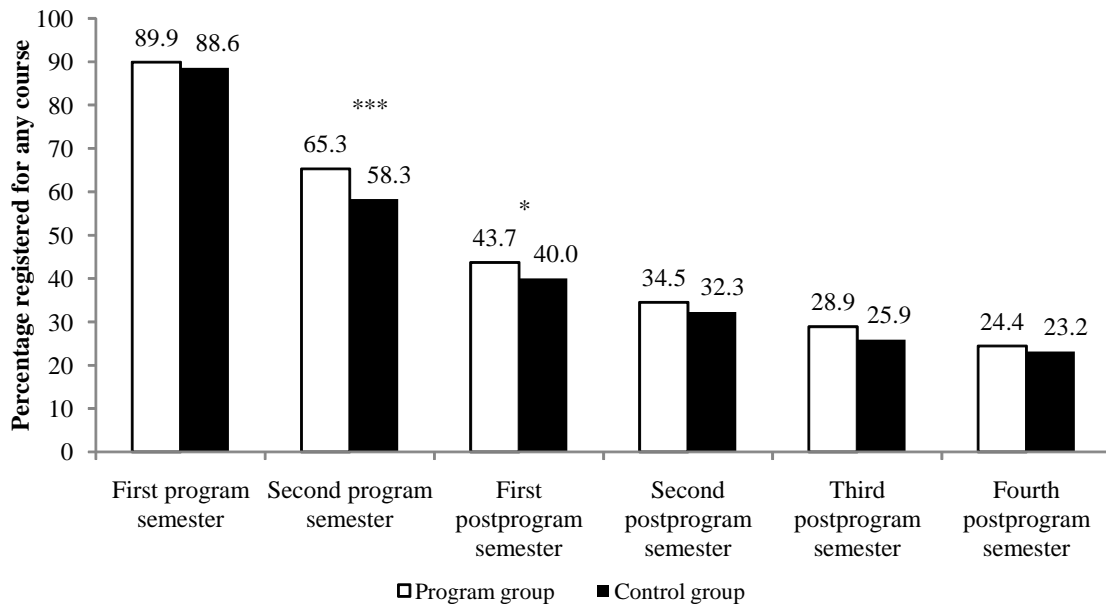
Figure ES.1 illustrates registration rates over the study’s three-year follow-up period. The white bars show the average outcomes for program group members, and the solid black bars show the averages for control group members. The difference between each pair of bars represents the program’s impact, and the presence of one or more asterisks indicates that an impact is *statistically significant*, meaning that it is unlikely to be due to chance. As the figure illustrates, over time there is an initial steep decline in registration rates for both research groups, followed by a more gradual decline. This pattern is common in community colleges. The primary question of the impact analysis is whether and to what extent the Opening Doors program affected those rates and other key academic outcomes.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Figure ES.1**

**Effects on Registration Rates**

**Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College Report**



SOURCES: Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College transcript data.

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

- **For the most part, the program did not substantially affect academic outcomes in the first program semester.**

As Figure ES.1 shows, the program group and control group had similar rates of registration during the first program semester. This is not surprising, since most program group students registered before receiving program services. In contrast, the program's enhanced counseling might be expected to positively affect the number of credits that students earned. As Figure ES.2 shows, however, the research groups earned about the same average number of credits during the first program semester.

- **The program increased registration rates and other academic outcomes in the second program semester.**

As shown in Figure ES.1, during the second program semester, 65.3 percent of the program group registered for at least one course, compared with 58.3 percent of the control group. The impact is likely primarily the effect of Opening Doors services provided during the first program semester, since registration typically occurs before a semester begins. During the second program semester, program group members earned an average of half a credit more than control group members. This impact is relatively modest: it represents one-sixth of a three-credit course. As Figure ES.2 shows, by the end of the second program semester, program group members had earned an average of 9.7 credits since entering the study, compared with 9.1 credits for the control group.

- **The program generated a small increase in registration rates during the first postprogram semester, but the effect dissipated in later semesters.**

As the third set of bars in Figure ES.1 illustrates, 43.7 percent of the program group members registered in the first postprogram semester, compared with 40.0 percent of the control group members. While smaller in magnitude than the program's impact on registration during the second program semester, this impact of 3.7 percentage points is statistically significant. Despite the impact on registration during the first postprogram semester, the program did not increase the average number of credits earned that semester. In the second, third, and fourth postprogram semesters, the program did not substantially affect registration or any other key academic outcomes.

Cumulative outcomes over the full follow-up period show only modest impacts. Program group members registered for an average of 3.3 semesters over the three-year period, whereas control group members registered for an average of 3.1 semesters. The program did not

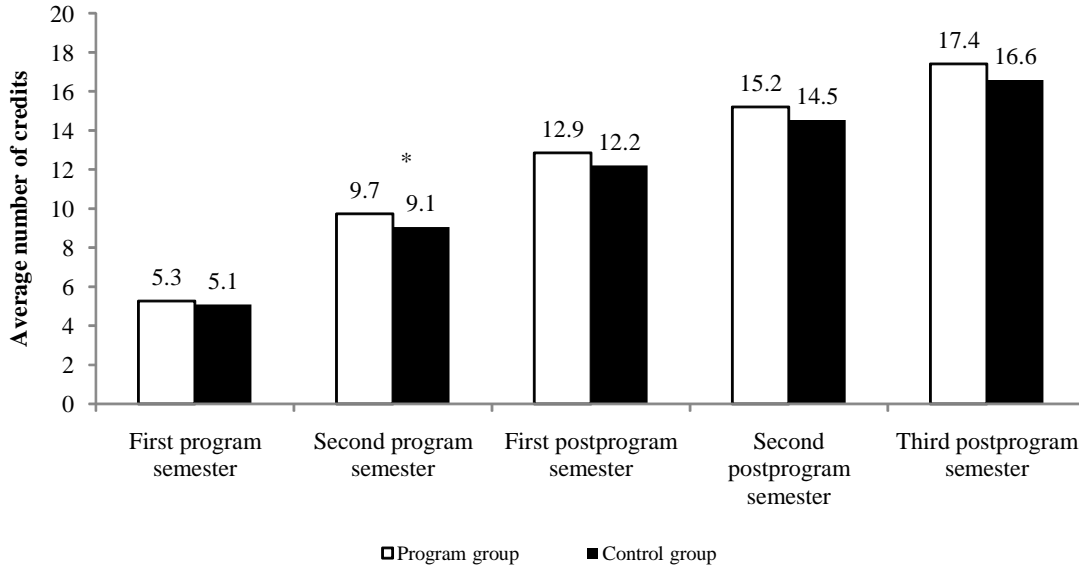


## The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure ES.2

### Effects on Average Cumulative Credits Earned

#### Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College Report



SOURCES: Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College transcript data.

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

significantly increase the average number of credits that program group members earned during the study, as is illustrated in the rightmost set of bars in Figure ES.2. (The 0.8 difference in cumulative credits earned is not statistically significant.)

- **For the most part, program impacts did not vary across the two colleges.**

Most of the differences between the effects on academic outcomes at the colleges are not statistically significant.

### What Are Some Conclusions Based on the Results?

It is reasonable to wonder whether a well-operated enhanced student services program (with a modest stipend) that lasts two semesters might have an effect on students' longer-term outcomes. Such an intervention might not only improve academic outcomes while services are

offered, but might also provide students with information about the college, clarity about their educational goals, improved problem-solving skills, and a feeling of connection to the college so that they can better cope with barriers in the future and continue to have better academic outcomes than students who did not receive the same help. The study in Ohio does not provide evidence of such effects.

The study — of one program tested at two colleges — cannot definitively determine how well this program might have worked at other colleges or how well other program models might have worked. It does, however, provide *suggestive* evidence, beyond the random assignment-based comparison, about enhancing student services.

Below are three ways in which the program in Ohio could have been changed to possibly produce larger or more lasting effects.

- 1. Provide services for a longer period.**

The program improved outcomes during the period in which students received services (and, to some extent, during the semester after the program ended). Many who advocate for enhanced student services view them as an ongoing need, since students continue to face barriers to success. They would argue that two semesters of enhanced services is not sufficient, and that in order for enhanced student services to lead to sustained impacts, program efforts must be sustained.

- 2. Provide more comprehensive enhanced student services.**

While increasing the program's duration is one possible way to boost the long-term impacts, it may also be worth exploring more comprehensive approaches to enhanced student services. The program studied in Ohio focused mainly on enhanced academic counseling, which is one of several key student services. Other components that could be offered include enhanced academic supports, such as tutoring, remedial assistance, and time management and study skills training, or enhanced supplemental services, like on-campus child care and transportation assistance.

- 3. Pair enhanced student services with other reforms.**

The program at Lorain and Owens provided the “lightest touch” of the programs that were operated as part of the multisite Opening Doors demonstration. Two colleges in Louisiana tested a performance-based scholarship program that provided up to \$2,000 and enhanced

student services to low-income parents over two semesters.<sup>4</sup> A college in New York tested a “learning community” — an approach that typically groups students in linked courses with mutually reinforcing themes and assignments in order to improve their college learning experience — that restructured participating students’ first semester in college.<sup>5</sup> A college in southern California offered a course that provided basic information on study skills and the requirements of college, along with enhanced student services and academic support for two semesters to students on probation.<sup>6</sup> These more comprehensive programs generated larger positive effects for students, and in at least one case, the effects continued after the services ended. It is possible that in order for enhanced student services to have a substantial effect on community college students, they need to be offered in conjunction with reforms in other areas that are more substantial than the modest stipend offered in Ohio.

\* \* \*

When college administrators consider whether or not to enhance student services, the cost of the enhancements could be an important factor. Given that the Opening Doors program in Ohio helped students when they received services (and in the semester after), it may be worthwhile for other colleges to offer similar enhancements, if the costs are modest. If funding is available, MDRC plans to conduct a study of the cost of the Ohio Opening Doors program. The research will provide an estimate of the gross cost of the services and will compare it with the cost of providing standard services at the colleges.

---

<sup>4</sup>Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Thomas Brock, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Lisa Barrow, *Rewarding Persistence: Effects of a Performance-Based Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents* (New York: MDRC, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo, with Jenny Au, Jedediah J. Teres, and Susan Yeh, *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>Susan Scrivener, Colleen Sommo, and Herbert Collado, *Getting Back on Track: Effects of a Community College Program for Probationary Students* (New York: MDRC, 2009).

