



What Have We Learned About Learning Communities at Community Colleges?

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In July 2012, MDRC and the National Center for Postsecondary Research released two reports on the effectiveness of learning communities, a popular strategy that places small cohorts of students together in two or more thematically linked courses, usually for a single semester, with added support, such as extra advising or tutoring. The theory behind learning communities is that they give students a chance to form stronger relationships with each other and their instructors, engage more deeply with the integrated content of the courses, and access extra support, making it more likely they'll pass their courses, persist from semester to semester, and graduate with a credential.

What Effects Did Each Report Find?

Together, these two reports provide results from six random assignment studies, offering reliable and complementary findings on the effectiveness of learning communities. One report examines the long-term impacts of a learning community program at one college. The other report looks at the short-term impacts of programs at six community colleges. For the best understanding of the effectiveness of the learning community model, readers should review both reports.

- **Long-Term Findings from Kingsborough Community College:** As part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, tested a one-semester learning community program. The program placed freshmen, most of whom needed developmental (or remedial) English, into groups of up to 25 students who took three classes together during their first semester: an 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 textbook vouchers. Early analysis found that the program improved students' college experiences and some short-term educational outcomes, including credits earned. The new report shows that, after six years, more students in the learning communities program earned a degree (35.9 percent) than did students in the control group (31.3 percent) — an impact of 4.6 percentage points. The increase in degree receipt was most evident for students who placed into college-level English at baseline, although there is evidence that the program also improved the long-term outcomes of students with the greatest developmental needs in English. The program also increased average credit accumulation by 4.0 credits over six years.
- **Short-Term Findings from Six Community Colleges That Operated Learning Communities with Developmental English or Math:** In part as a result of the early Kingsborough Community College findings, the National Center for Postsecondary Research, of which MDRC is a partner, tested learning community programs in six colleges that participated in the Learning Communities Demonstration. Five of these — the Community College of Baltimore County in Maryland, Hillsborough Community College in Florida, Houston Community College in Texas, Merced College in California, and Queensborough Community College in New York — operated learning communities that included developmental courses in English or math. The report examines the outcomes of students up to three semesters after they entered the study at these five

colleges, plus those for students who took developmental English in the original Kingsborough Opening Doors study. It includes data for almost 7,000 developmental education students, about half of whom enrolled in 174 learning communities across the six colleges. The results show that, on average, these programs produced no impact on persistence, a half-credit impact on credits earned in the targeted subject (English or mathematics), no impact on credits outside that subject, and a half-credit effect on total credits earned.

What Do the Findings Suggest Together?

Taken together, the results from the studies suggest the following:

- One-semester learning communities *can* have a long-term impact and even boost graduation, as shown in the study of the Kingsborough program.
- However, results from the Learning Community Demonstration suggest that *on average* learning communities for developmental education students produce only a modest impact on credits earned in the targeted subject of English or mathematics.
- Implementing learning communities at scale is challenging but possible. Learning communities with high levels of curricular integration among courses are particularly hard to establish and maintain.

Are These Studies the Final Word on Learning Communities?

The two studies together produced highly reliable estimates of the impacts of six programs, both individually and as a whole, on credits earned and persistence. However, important questions remain, including:

Was there something about the Kingsborough program or its setting that accounts for the larger impacts in the short term and the impact on completion? The program at Kingsborough Community College that was the subject of the long-term follow-up, and also the program with the largest effects in the short term, featured a number of enhancements that may have influenced the program impacts. It included a larger number of credits associated with the three-course links, extra academic and counseling support, and textbook vouchers. The program at Kingsborough also targeted students who intended to enroll full time. While most of the students required developmental English, about 20 percent were ready for placement into college-level English classes. Finally, the program received strong institutional support, including professional development opportunities for instructors and the promotion of learning communities during the recruitment process. While each of these may have played a role in the impacts at Kingsborough, the research cannot pinpoint which of these features mattered most. MDRC will continue to follow the Kingsborough story, publishing seven-year graduation rates and effects on students' employment in future reports.

Would the results have been different if the curricula in the learning communities had been more tightly integrated? Although the implementation research on the six programs shows that the learning communities were generally well-implemented with respect to three of the four key components of the model (enrollment of small cohorts into two or three courses, communication between the instructors in the links, and access to additional academic or advising support), some learning communities in each college fell short of full implementation of the fourth component: curricular integration. The research was not designed to distinguish between the impacts of those learning communities with stronger integration from those with less, leaving open the question of whether impacts would have been larger for the former.

While the research from these studies may not be the final word on learning communities, it nonetheless increases significantly the evidence that colleges, policymakers, and funders can use to inform their decisions about whether and how to offer or scale up learning communities in community colleges.

To access the reports, visit www.mdrc.org.