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March 11

Promising Path on Remediation

Remedial education remains a struggle for many community colleges, which are expected to help students who received inadequate high school educations get ready for college-level work. Legislators hate paying for remedial education; community colleges hate being defined by remedial education; students hate being unable to get into the college-level courses that attracted them to higher education in the first place.

A study being released today by MDRC, a research organization, suggests that “learning communities” — in which students take several courses together as a cohort — have the potential to significantly improve students’ performance in remedial courses and ability to advance to college-level work. The learning communities also featured special counseling and other support services.

The study is particularly significant in that Kingsborough Community College, a part of the City University of New York where the work took place, helped the researchers conduct a true randomized trial — in which students were assigned either to the learning community or a control group. Much education research takes place either after a college has made a change (so there is no control group) or with volunteer pilot projects (in which issues of self-selection may raise doubts about the outcome). The MDRC researchers believe theirs is the first study of its kind to use a true random trial.

The students in the learning communities took, as a group, a remedial English course, an academic course in health or psychology, and a one-credit orientation course. All of the students were entering Kingsborough, seeking to enroll full time. The college serves a diverse population — 38 percent of students are black, 20 percent are Hispanic, and almost three-fourths report at least one parent was born outside the United States. The experimental group and the control group had similar demographics.

On a wide range of factors, the students in learning communities had more success than the students in the control group. The learning community group took more courses on average (4.9 vs. 4.4), passed more classes (3.8 vs. 3.2), earned more credits (11.5 vs. 10.4), and had a larger share of students passing all courses (43.1 percent vs. 33.0 percent). Moreover, the students in the learning community had statistically significant increases in the rates at which they passed the English tests necessary to qualify for college-level work and degrees at CUNY.

Susan Scrivener, a senior associate at MDRC and one of the researchers on the project, said that the results are encouraging and significant. Past research has shown that “remedial education is such a hard area to affect, so it’s pretty notable that folks are moving through that.”

Many previous studies have found that students who languish in remedial education year after year are unlikely to move to college-level work, so the fact that significantly more students can finish and move to college-level work is of great importance, Scrivener said.

Regina Peruggi, president of Kingsborough, said that as a result of this program, “three semesters out, these students are still taking courses and others aren’t.” The effort has been so successful that Peruggi said her goal is to have all freshmen in learning communities — the college is already at over 60 percent.

Peruggi also said she would like to find ways to apply the concept beyond the first semester. Learning communities become more challenging to set up as students progress, since they may have more specialized courses that they need and putting together a cohort becomes difficult. But Peruggi said that the college is setting up some upper-level learning communities as well. She said that the results made her want to focus more attention on faculty members talking to faculty members in other departments — since that happens in learning communities and is cited by professors as key to their success.

Rebecca Arliss, an associate professor of health who teaches in one of the learning communities, agreed. She said that weekly formal meetings, and more frequent informal discussions, took place among the professors who were teaching the same students. The professors worked together to reinforce one another, whether on behavioral issues (students not paying attention) or the curriculum (adding writing assignments to non-writing focused courses).

Arliss said she has added writing to many of her class sessions, having students do quick responses to prompts — all designed to reinforce basic writing skills. In the more traditional model, a professor may have no idea how a student is faring in other classes. “We’re trying to be mutually reinforcing,” she said. “The question is always: How are we going to reach these kids?”

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/03/11/learning>.*

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Today's News

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

Taking Courses as a Group Helps Community-College Freshmen Succeed, Study Finds

By [BECKIE SUPIANO](#)

Learning communities' linked courses that enroll a common group of students and are paired with enhanced services' increase the academic success of community-college students, according to a new report. Learning communities' effect on student retention, however, was less clear.

The study, conducted by the nonprofit research organization MDRC, tracked the progress of freshmen at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York, in Brooklyn, from 2003-5. Newly enrolling students were randomly assigned to a one-semester learning-community program or to a control group. Those in the learning communities were placed in groups of up to 25 and took three related courses: English (usually at the remedial level), a college-level academic course, and a one-credit orientation course. They also received special counseling, tutoring, and a voucher for textbooks.

The program at Kingsborough is part of the [Opening Doors](#) demonstration, which MDRC is using at six community colleges to test strategies for helping low-income students succeed. "The major take-away for me was something we believe: Learning communities do make a difference with students moving through developmental course work and getting academic credit," said Regina S. Peruggi, Kingsborough's president.

Students in learning communities were more likely than those in the control group to take and pass the English-assessment tests they needed to graduate or transfer to a four-year college, said the report, "A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College." Kingsborough's learning-community program emphasized English, and, as a result, more first-semester students at the college took developmental English.

Getting students through developmental classes quickly is important, Ms. Peruggi said. Students are "too often enmeshed in a web of developmental courses," she said, which can be discouraging and cause them to drop out.

Students in the program also took and passed more classes, and earned more credits during the first semester than the other students did. In addition, students in the learning community said they felt more connected to the college when they were surveyed one year after the program.

Less clear was the program's effect on student persistence in college. Retention for students in the program increased only during their third semester. The study showed that 53 percent of program students enrolled in at least one Kingsborough course during that semester, compared with 48 percent of the control group.

Researchers will continue to follow the students' progress for at least one more year, said Susan E. Scrivener, a senior associate at MDRC and the lead author of the study. Graduation rates of both groups will also be tracked. The authors note that they have found a pattern across the Opening Doors project: Effects are strongest when students are receiving special services, and diminish after the services end. Findings from the learning-communities study fit this pattern.

The study's authors suggest that a similar program lasting more than one semester might have a greater effect on student success, although the program was designed on the theory that improved early performance in college enhances performance throughout. It would also be difficult to continue the program beyond the first semester, when students specialize. Students must select a major after passing their first semester of classes in order to secure financial aid, Ms. Peruggi said.

The study's authors recognize that difficulty and suggest that, in the absence of continued learning communities, students could still receive services like counseling or financial support in subsequent semesters.

Another option—one that Kingsborough is exploring—is to have students make the transition into a second learning community, which would incorporate course work from their major, Ms. Peruggi said.

The report has led Kingsborough to plan to expand the learning-communities program, which now enrolls 65 percent of freshmen, to reach 80 percent of its freshmen by 2010. It has also sparked another study, which will explore the effects of learning communities at six community colleges, including Kingsborough's career-based program.

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