

Remedial program 'opening doors'

BY RACHEL MONAHAN

ISMAEL PENA arrived at Kingsborough Community College last fall unable to write well enough to keep up with his classwork.

After a few months in a highly touted program that is being copied around the country, Pena, 20, passed a required English test with flying colors.

At community colleges nationwide, more than 60% of freshmen are enrolled in at least one remedial class, according to the national policy research organization MDRC.

"It's really a national crisis," said Kingsborough Academic Affairs Director Rachel Singer. "Students get very frustrated."

Students in Kingsborough's Opening Doors Learning Communities program aren't on their

own. Advisers stay on top of how students are doing and professors are in constant communication about students' progress in the program, which was started in 2003.

In addition to taking regular courses, students in the program take specially tailored English classes and an orientation course, which includes instruction on how to study and explore career possibilities.

A study released last month made the program's success official.

MDRC found Kingsborough's Opening Doors

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students were more likely to pass their English skills tests.

Two years after participation, slightly more students from the program were still enrolled in school than students who were not in the Opening Doors classes.

"The success rate has been unbelievable," said Zuleika Rodriguez, the program's head adviser, who has helped students with everything from scheduling classes to finding housing.

"[Students'] lives are difficult," said Marcia Babbitt, co-director of the Opening Doors pro-

gram. "They're working 30 hours or more. This is their way to success."

Kingsborough officials have been so successful in addressing the problem of unskilled students that they've helped other community colleges across the country set up similar programs, Singer said.

Kingsborough aims to enroll 80% of its own students in the program by 2010.

"When I got in [to Kingsborough], it had been so many years [since she had been in a classroom]," said Margaret Spence, 47, of Breezy Point, Queens, who returned to school in 2006. "I was nervous, apprehensive. I hadn't written a paper or taken classes in so many years."

"Opening Doors was great," Spence added. "I needed the support. It helped me immensely."

Tuesday, April 1, 2008