

# Learning Communities Demonstration: Understanding Programs Designed for Student Success

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# Learning Communities: An intervention for low-skilled students

- Popularity of learning communities
  - 62 percent of responding colleges in one national survey used learning communities (Barefoot, 2002)
- Strong theoretical base for learning communities, but limited evidence on impacts
  - Tinto and Evergreen
  - MDRC's evaluation of KCC – Opening Doors
- Roughly 40 percent of students entering college are enrolled in a developmental course (U.S. Department of Education, 2003)
- Roughly 76 percent of students who participated in developmental courses in community colleges are not enrolled or have not graduated after 4 years (National Study for Developmental Education)



# Learning Communities are....

- Two or more linked courses (one developmental course) that are often scheduled in a block of time
- Peer cohort
- Curricular integration which requires faculty collaboration



# Potential Benefits of Learning Communities

- What's appealing to students:
  - Makes developmental classes more engaging and meaningful
  - Allows for deeper understanding and integration of the course materials
  - Fosters greater opportunity to build a community with peers and teachers
  - Creates a supportive and personalized learning environment
  - Strengthens students' attachment and engagement to the institution
  - Enables students to master basic skills and transition to college level courses



## Potential Benefits of Learning Communities (cont.)

- What's appealing to faculty:
  - Increases engagement with students and other faculty
  - Breaks down the typical isolation and individualism in teaching
  - Creates a collaborative and empowering teaching environment

(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004; Tinto, 1998; Shapiro and Levine, 1999)



# Purpose

- Strengthen and improve learning communities and instructional practices at six participating colleges
- Build the body of evidence on the effectiveness of learning communities to inform public policy and institutional practice
- Apply findings on how to implement and improve learning communities nationwide
- Improve student success in college



# Technical Assistance to Colleges

- Opportunity to receive state-of-the-art technical assistance from two of the leaders in the field (Washington Center at Evergreen State College & Kingsborough Community College)
- Marketing & Recruitment Assistance
  - Assistance with the development of marketing and recruitment strategies and materials
  - Funding for student incentives (i.e., gift certificates)



# Purpose of the Evaluation

- Examine the impact of learning community models on:
  - Persistence
  - Credit Accumulation
  - Grade Point Average
- If funding becomes available for extended follow-up, examine the impact of learning community models on:
  - Graduation
  - Degree Attainment
  - Transfer rates to other colleges or universities
- Understand how and why learning communities impact or do not impact the above outcomes
- Provide cost analysis of learning communities



# Components of Evaluation: Impact Study

- Key Questions
  - What are the effects of learning communities on student achievement in credit accumulation and grade point average?
  - What are the effects of learning communities on student persistence in higher education?
  - What are the effects of learning communities on graduation, degree attainment and transfer rates (if continued funding becomes available)?
- Data Sources
  - Baseline Data
  - Student transcripts
- Methodology
  - Random Assignment (lottery-like process)
  - Two-year follow-up (until 2011)
- Determines
  - the differences in outcomes between students in program and business as usual groups



# Random Assignment Design

- 1,000 students over three semesters are randomly assigned to a program (learning communities) or business as usual group (regular college courses) through a lottery-like process.
  - The students in the program and business as usual groups have similar characteristics.
- Participation in the learning community becomes the difference in the experience of the program group and business as usual group students.
  - Students in the program group illustrate outcomes from participation in learning communities.
  - Students in the business as usual group represent what happens without participation in learning communities.

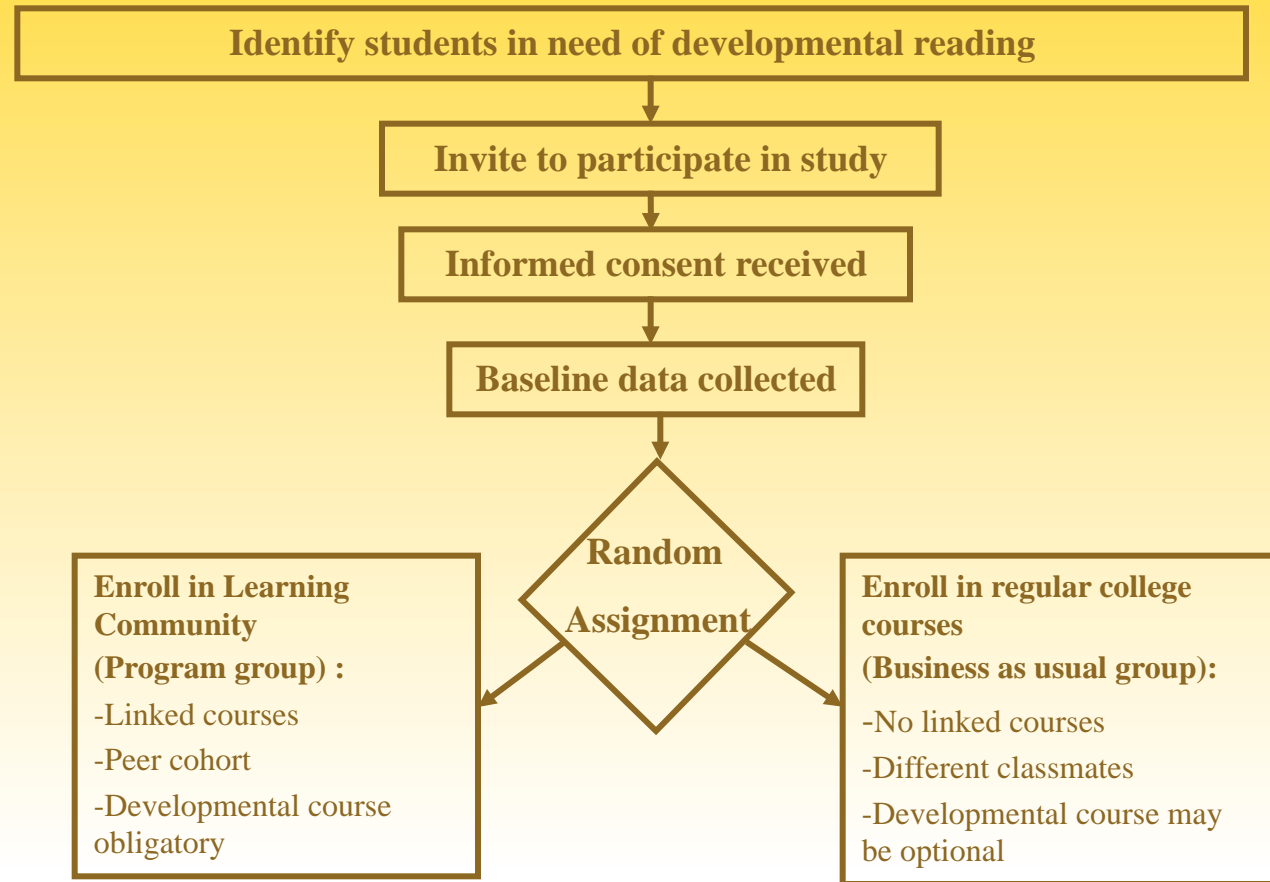


# Why Random Assignment?

- It is the most reliable way to measure impacts.
  - It ensures that the motivation levels and personal characteristics of students in the program and control groups are the same at the beginning of the study.
  - Any subsequent differences in educational or other outcomes can be attributed with a high level of confidence to the learning community



# Random Assignment



## Criteria For Selecting Colleges

- History of offering learning communities for students in need of developmental English or math
- Capacity to enroll 1,000 students into the research sample over three semesters; at least 500 students in the learning communities and 500 students in the business as usual group
- Link between at least one developmental course and one or two other classes
- Desire to bring learning communities program to scale



# Sample

- More than 6000 students in the study from six colleges:
  - Hillsborough Community College, FL
  - Kingsborough Community College, NY
  - Queensborough Community College, NY
  - Merced College, CA
  - Community College of Baltimore County, MD
  - Houston Community College, TX
- Each college is an independent test.



## Sample Build-Up & Number of Learning Communities – Fall’07 – Spr ‘09

	Fall 07	Spr08	Fall 08	Spring 09	Sample Size*	Number of LCs
Hillsborough	377	324	370	-	1081	24
Houston	-	65	375	283	723	20
Kingsborough	125	160	190	246	721	25
Merced	-	176	380	362	918	21
Queensborough	195	198	372	269	1034	26
Baltimore	-	122	371	193	686	20

\*Total sample size as of Spring '09. Four colleges cont'd RA in Fall '09 and we enrolled another 1500 students.



# Components of Evaluation: Implementation Study

- Key Questions
  - What did the learning communities “look” like? What was the operating environment? What services were offered?
  - How can learning communities be designed and operated to address the needs of students with low basic skills?
  - How do such learning communities differ from traditional developmental education programs?
  - What factors seem to account for the impacts?
  
- Data Sources
  - Field visits: focus groups, classroom observations & interviews with student and faculty
  - Faculty survey
  
- Determines:
  - the program design and operation
  - the classroom experience of students and faculty in the program and control groups
  - level of consistency between various learning communities
  - measures of faculty qualification, attitudes and practices in the program and business as usual group.



# Components of Evaluation: Cost Analysis Study

- Key Questions
  - What are the costs of learning communities?
  - How do these costs compare to standard college programs for students with low basic skills?



# Challenges to Implementing Learning Communities

- Scaling Up
  - Recruiting and supporting faculty
  - Determining the “right” links
  - Negotiating between Student Affairs/  
Academic Affairs
- Need for strong academic leadership
- Faculty development is needed to improve curricular integration.
- Time - Most learning communities matured over time.



# Concluding Thoughts

- Large scale random assignment can be done in community college settings.
- Scaling programs up so that they can be tested using random assignment methods is challenging, but not impossible.
- Implementation research is critical to understanding the program and its effects.



# N CPR Learning Communities Reports

Winter 2009

- Implementation report

Summer 2010

- Hillsborough report

Fall 2010 – Fall 2011

- All other institutional reports



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