

Scaling Up Learning Communities: The Experience of Six Community Colleges

A Panel for the League for Innovation
Baltimore, March 31, 2010

Mary Visher, MDRC

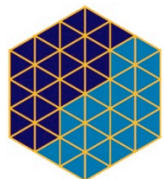
DonnaMcKusick, CCBC

Cheryll Botts, Houston

Beverly Hixon, Houston

Aimee Alexander-Shea, Hillsborough

Christopher Calafiore, Kingsborough



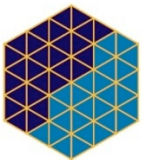
National Center for Postsecondary Research

www.PostsecondaryResearch.org

NCPR PARTNERS:
Community College Research Center,
Teachers College, Columbia University
MDRC
Curry School of Education,
University of Virginia

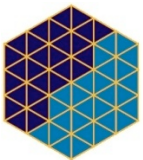
What are Learning Communities?

- In their most basic form, learning communities enroll a single cohort of students together in two or more courses.
- Some learning communities share a common theme, combined syllabi, include project-based learning, and faculty pairs collaborate.
- A popular strategy for developmental students is to link a developmental course with a college-level course such as Sociology or Biology.



Why Might Learning Communities Work for Academically-Underprepared Students?

- Students see connections between disciplines and can learn basic skills in a meaningful context – while (sometimes) earning college credit.
- Students form social and academic networks that can help them persist.
- Students engage more deeply in learning and feel more motivated which can help them persist.
- Faculty may benefit from professional community.



Do LCs Make a Difference in Student Outcomes?

- Some early research by Tinto and others found positive outcomes.
- But most studies fail to account for the possibility that those outcomes may have had more to do with the types of students who *choose* to enroll in learning communities than the program itself.
- One random assignment study at one college suggests that LCs are indeed promising...

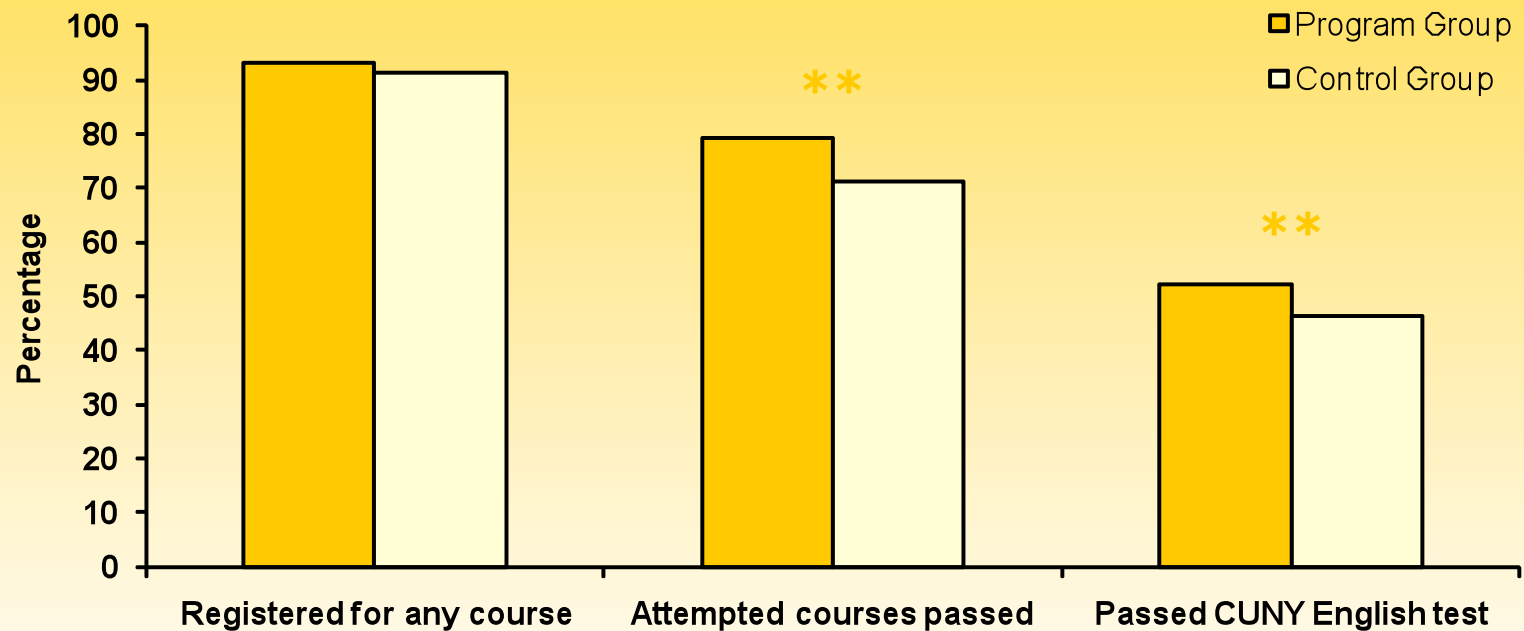


Opening Doors: Kingsborough Learning Communities

- Targeted incoming freshmen
- Created cohorts of students who took all first-semester courses together:
 - English (usually developmental level)
 - Student success course
 - Standard college course, such as introductory psychology or health
- Encouraged coordination among faculty teams



Effects of Kingsborough's Learning Communities Program after 1 Semester



Building on the Kingsborough Results: The Learning Communities Demonstration

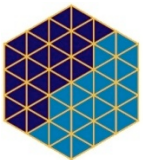
- A test of LCs in six different colleges.
- The study randomly assigned 6,799 students over four semesters.
- Findings from implementation study available any day.
- Findings on impacts will be available in next few months.



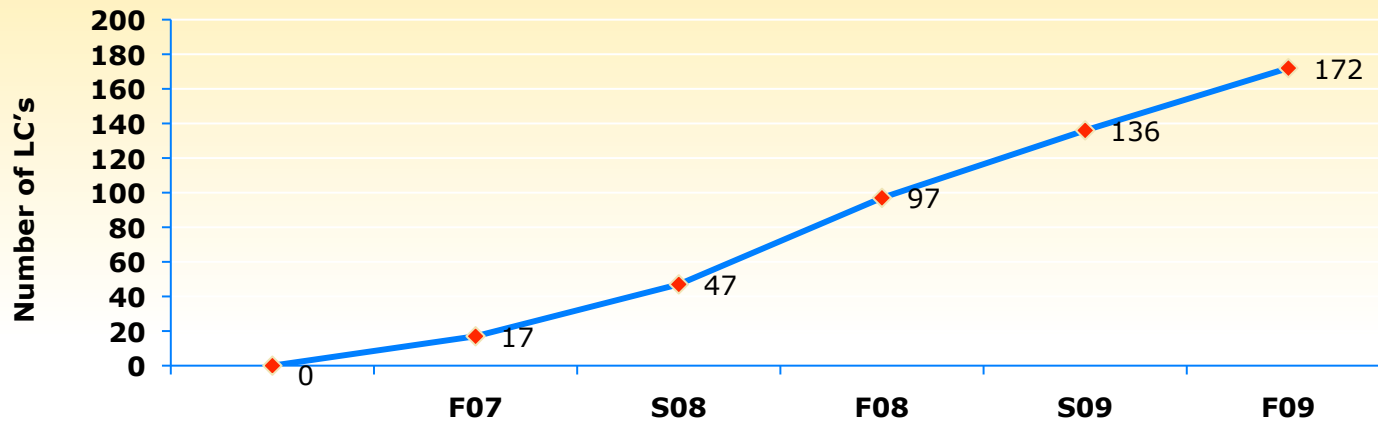
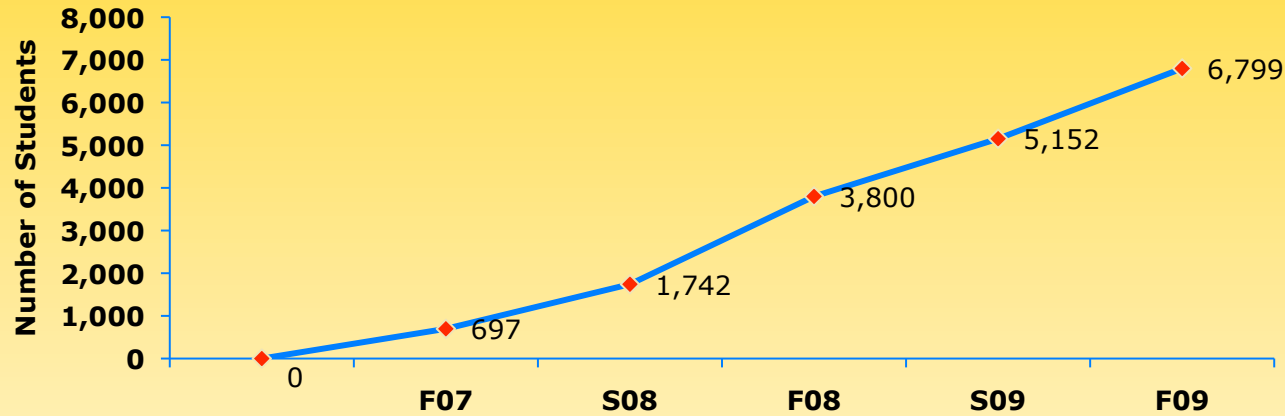
The Demonstration Sites

Five colleges served developmental students; one served regular students.

1. Hillsborough Community College (Tampa, Florida)
2. Houston Community College System (Houston, Texas)
3. Queensborough Community College (Queens, New York)
4. Merced College (Merced, California)
5. Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, NY)
6. Community College of Baltimore County (Baltimore, Maryland)



Scaling Up: Moving from boutique programs to serving thousands of students



Lessons Learned From Research on Learning Communities

On Impacts:

- Learning communities move students more quickly through developmental English requirements.
- Students in learning communities report stronger engagement and sense of belonging.
- The jury is still out on whether learning communities improve student persistence.



Lessons Learned From Research on Learning Communities

On Scaling Up:

- Scaling up to serve many students is HARD WORK!
- Changing teaching and learning is challenging: getting buy-in from, pairing up, and supporting faculty to teach in learning communities is a challenge.
- Colleges take time to master the art of scheduling learning communities, a task even more challenging with current soaring enrollments.



When it all comes together...

- In the words of one faculty member:

"Students are more engaged in both classes because they see the connections. They also form bonds more quickly which result in assisting and encouraging each other. In addition, both instructors can better meet the needs of the students through ongoing communication and collaboration."

- In the words of a student:

"After reading the book [Zero] you see math everywhere. It's in nature. Something was there that I didn't realize. At first I didn't think I would need to know 'x equals something.' I didn't see that it applies everywhere and now I do."



THANK YOU!

Contact information:

Mary Visher mary.visher@mdrc.org

All MDRC reports available for download at www.mdrc.org



NCPR is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education