



Breaking New Ground

An Impact Study of Career-Focused
Learning Communities at Kingsborough
Community College

Mary G. Visher
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JULY 2011

THE LEARNING
COMMUNITIES
DEMONSTRATION



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Executive Summary

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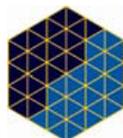
An Impact Study of Career-Focused Learning Communities at Kingsborough Community College

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with

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Overview

The low completion rates of students in community colleges have been well documented. Among students who enroll in community colleges hoping to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution, only about half achieve this goal within six years. Many factors contribute to these low success rates, including lack of financial support, lack of motivation and direction, competing demands from family and jobs, and inadequate college-readiness skills. In an effort to address some of those barriers and to increase the number of students who achieve their education and career goals, community colleges are turning increasingly to learning communities — in which cohorts of students are coenrolled in two or sometimes three courses that are linked by a common theme and are taught by a team of instructors who collaborate with each other around the syllabi and assignments.

Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, is a leader in the learning community movement. The college, which has run learning communities for many years and has a long history of implementing innovative programs for its students, is one of six colleges participating in the National Center for Postsecondary Research's Learning Communities Demonstration, in which random assignment evaluations are being used to determine the impacts of learning communities on students' academic achievement. This report presents findings from an evaluation of Kingsborough's unique Career-Focused Learning Communities program, the latest iteration in a series of learning community models designed and implemented by the college. It consisted of two courses required for a specific major and a third course called the "integrative seminar" that was designed to reinforce the learning in the two other courses and to expose students to information about careers in their selected major. The key findings presented in this report are:

- Kingsborough's learning communities program model was sophisticated and ambitious relative to the typical model in its offer of three rather than two linked courses and its focus on integrated curricula.
- Start-up problems during implementation kept the program from achieving a "steady state" during the demonstration.
- For the sample as a whole, the program did not have meaningful impacts on the educational outcomes that were measured during the semesters in which students enrolled in a learning community or on outcomes measured in the following semester.
- For students who had recently transferred from another college, the program had a modest but positive impact on credits earned during the semester in which the program ran.

Findings from the Learning Communities Demonstration reports that have been released to date generally show that learning community impacts, when they occur, tend to be modest and concentrated in the semester in which the learning communities are run. However, a fuller understanding will be gained as findings are released from the remaining two colleges in the demonstration. In addition, a final report, including further follow-up findings, will be released in 2012.

Preface

With their low costs and nonselective admissions policies, community colleges are often the best chance that disadvantaged Americans have to obtain a postsecondary credential. Yet for many of these students, the odds of succeeding are dismally low: only 51 percent of incoming students earn a credential within six years. One popular strategy used by colleges that are intent on increasing completion rates is the learning community, in which small groups of students take thematically linked classes together, helping them to form relationships with each other and with their instructors, to strengthen their ties to the college community, and to engage more deeply with the curriculum. As a result, proponents say, students will improve their academic persistence and achievement.

Kingsborough Community College is a national leader in the learning communities movement. After successfully operating learning communities for first-year developmental education students — and encouraged by the positive, if modest, impacts of its program in 2005 — the college decided to create a new kind of learning communities program. Part of the national Learning Communities Demonstration, in which six colleges participated, Kingsborough's Career-Focused Learning Communities program was ambitious and unique in its focus on second semester students, its linking of three rather than the usual two courses, and its emphasis on helping students make more informed decisions about their majors and careers. MDRC is leading the evaluation of the Learning Communities Demonstration as a partner in the National Center for Postsecondary Research, which is funded by a grant (R305A060010) from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. The other partners are the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University.

As observed in this report, Kingsborough's Career-Focused Learning Communities program — while it certainly broke new ground in terms of offering an innovative and unusual learning communities model — did not have significant impacts on students' credit accumulation or persistence in school. It is possible that Kingsborough's highly student-centered learning environment, which includes an abundance of student support services and generous professional development opportunities, makes it difficult for a new program to improve students' academic outcomes above and beyond what the college's extensive supports already produce. Whatever the explanation, these latest results, along with similar findings now reported for all but two of the colleges in the demonstration, are helping to answer critical questions about both the opportunities and limitations of this popular strategy. And there is more to come. Over the next two years, with the release of reports from the two remaining colleges in the demonstration and a final report on the findings from all six sites and an extended follow-up period, a more complete picture will emerge.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

We would like to first express our deepest gratitude to the administrators and faculty of Kingsborough Community College. Kingsborough is an extraordinary institution — dedicated to student-centered reform and committed to evaluation as a guiding tool for creating programs that best serve its students. Time and time again, Kingsborough’s leaders have agreed to let their institution serve as a laboratory for research, courageously subjecting their innovative programs, such as learning communities, to rigorous evaluation. In particular, we want to thank President Regina Peruggi and Provost Stuart Suss, who have both shown unflinching support for learning communities and for research. Our friend and partner, Rachel Singer, Director of Academic Affairs, deserves a standing ovation for her tireless and inspiring leadership at the college and in the nation for her work with learning community programs and other reforms. Janine Graziano-King has done much to encourage and support faculty who want to improve their teaching, both in and outside of learning communities — and was an invaluable resource to the research team.

The Learning Communities Demonstration is part of the National Center for Post-secondary Research (NCPR), which is supported by a grant (R305A060010) from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. The project received additional support from funders listed at the front of this report, but we would like to single out the Robin Hood Foundation for its steady and much-needed support of Kingsborough’s learning communities. We also thank Thomas Bailey of the Community College Research Center and Principal Investigator for NCPR, who provided valuable comments on earlier drafts of this report.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the varied and important contributions of the project team at MDRC who made this report possible. Thomas Brock and Rob Ivry led the early design and management of the overall Learning Communities project as well as provided astute comments on drafts of all the reports, including this one. We are grateful to Dan Bloom, Alice Tufel, and John Hutchins for their candid and insightful comments on drafts. Michael Weiss, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, and Colleen Sommo provided invaluable technical advice on the statistical analyses. Herbert Collado worked with Kingsborough staff to support random assignment procedures, and, with help from Paulette Cha, conducted field research. Kate Gualtieri managed the budget for the demonstration and weighed in with useful feedback at almost every critical juncture. Donna Chan helped process, fact-check, and create tables presenting the student records data. Alice Tufel edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell and David Sobel prepared it for publication. Everything we do at MDRC is a team effort and this report exemplifies the very best of those efforts.

The Authors

Executive Summary

The low completion rates of students in community colleges have been well documented in recent years. Among students who enroll in community colleges hoping to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution, only about half achieve this goal within six years.¹ Many factors contribute to the low success rates of community college students,² including lack of financial support, lack of motivation, a sense of not belonging in the college environment, competing demands from family and jobs, and inadequate college-readiness skills. Community colleges are increasingly using learning communities to try to address some of those barriers and to increase the number of students who achieve their education and career goals.

A learning community is made up of a cohort of students who coenroll in two, or sometimes three, courses that are linked by a common theme and are taught by a team of instructors who collaborate with each other around the syllabi and assignments. One of the advantages of learning communities is that they give students a better chance of getting to know each other and learn together. Extra support in the form of tutoring or enhanced advising is often incorporated directly into the classroom experience. Learning communities in community colleges typically last one semester and are offered to incoming freshmen. The theory of change underlying the model stipulates that if students are more engaged in what they are learning and more connected with each other and with their instructors, they are more likely to master the course material, pass their courses, and persist from semester to semester.³

¹A. W. Radford, L. Berkner, S. C. Wheelless, and B. Shepherd, *Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

²Clifford Adelman, *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2004); T. Bailey and M. Alfonso, *Paths to Persistence: An Analysis of Research on Program Effectiveness at Community Colleges* (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education, 2005); Henry Levin and Juan Carlos Calcagno, "Remediation in the Community College," *Community College Review* 35 (2008): 181-207.

³Vincent Tinto, "Dropout From Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," *Review of Education Research* 45 (1975): 89-125; Vincent Tinto, "Classrooms as Communities: Exploring the Educational Character of Student Persistence," *Journal of Higher Education* 69 (1997): 599-623; Cathy McHugh Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, "Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students," *Opportunity Matters* 1 (2008); Gillies Malnarich, with Pam Dusenberry, Ben Sloan, Jan Swinton, and Phyllis van Slyck, *The Pedagogy of Possibilities: Developmental Education, College-Level Studies, and Learning Communities*, National Learning Communities Project Monograph Series (Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, in cooperation with the American Association for Higher Education, 2003); Mary G. Visher, Emily Schneider, Heather Wathington, and Herbert Collado, *Scaling Up Learning Communities: The Experience of Six Community Colleges* (New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research, 2010).

Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, is a leader in the learning community movement. The college has run learning communities for many years, and more than half of its incoming freshmen were enrolled in one as of 2010. This report presents findings from an evaluation of Kingsborough’s “Career-Focused Learning Communities” program, the latest iteration in a series of learning community models designed and implemented by the college. Unlike more typical programs, it targeted continuing rather than first-semester students and it consisted of three courses — two courses required for a specific major and a third course called the “integrative seminar,” designed to reinforce the learning in the other two courses as well as expose students to information about careers in their selected major.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Kingsborough’s program was one of six programs that were evaluated in the Learning Communities Demonstration (described below) and the only one that was designed for students who had declared a major and that did not include a course in developmental math, English, or reading. (The other five programs in the Learning Communities Demonstration were at The Community College of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland; Hillsborough Community College, Tampa, Florida; Houston Community College, Houston, Texas; Merced College, Merced, California; and Queensborough Community College, Queens, New York.)

The Learning Communities Demonstration is a nationwide, random assignment evaluation funded in part by the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR) through a grant (R305A060010) from the U.S. Department of Education and in part by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Robin Hood Foundation. MDRC — an NCPR partner along with the Community College Research Center, the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University — is the lead organization for the Learning Communities Demonstration.

Study intake for the demonstration began in fall 2007 and was completed for all six colleges two years later. At each college, about 1,000 students were recruited into the study, approximately 60 percent of whom were randomly assigned to the program group and 40 percent to a control group. Program group members were invited to enroll in a learning community; control group members were allowed to enroll in any class other than a learning community class. By comparing the different outcomes for program and control group students, the study was able to gauge the “impact” — or net value added — of the program on key student outcomes over two semesters. Differences in outcomes that are statistically significant — that is, unlikely to have arisen by chance — indicate that the program had an impact during the study period on the outcomes being measured. The learning communities programs in the demonstration lasted for one semester per cohort at each college, and transcript data were collected on both the program and control groups for up to three semesters after random

assignment. The evaluation looked at the percentage of students who passed the developmental courses in the learning communities, percentage of students who reenrolled in college the following semester, and credits accumulated. This report is the fourth in a series of six reports on findings from the Learning Communities Demonstration.

The Career-Focused Learning Communities Program at Kingsborough Community College

The career-focused learning community model at Kingsborough differed from the other models in the Learning Communities Demonstration in certain key ways. First, whereas the other programs targeted students in developmental education, who were generally in their first semester at college, the Kingsborough program enrolled students who had fulfilled all or most of their developmental education requirements, were in their second semester or beyond, and had declared a major. By the end of the demonstration, learning communities were offered in eight majors: allied health, accounting, business administration, criminal justice, early childhood education, liberal arts, mental health, and tourism and hospitality. Second, it was the most advanced of the six models tested, linking three courses rather than the customary two. The third course, the “integrative seminar,” was designed to reinforce the interdisciplinary teaching in the other two courses and raise students’ awareness of career options in their selected majors. Third, unlike the other colleges in the demonstration, Kingsborough placed a heavy emphasis on joint assignments (called “integrative assignments”), project-based learning, and engaging students in active, collaborative learning rather than passively listening to lectures. Instructor teams were expected to spend a significant amount of time planning and integrating their courses and were given the support to do so. Finally, an explicit goal of the program and one that was unique to Kingsborough’s career-focused approach was to offer students opportunities to learn more about careers that were associated with their majors so that they could make more informed decisions about their education and career goals.

Eligibility for participation in the study of Kingsborough’s career-focused learning communities was limited to continuing students who had earned six or more credits, had declared one of the eight majors noted above, and were able to take the learning communities courses at the scheduled times. A total of 917 students were enrolled in the study between May 2007 and September 2009. Cohorts of program group students participated in the single-semester program over the course of five semesters: fall 2007, spring 2008, fall 2008, spring 2009, and fall 2009.

Key Findings

- **Kingsborough’s learning communities program was based on a sophisticated and ambitious model.** While Kingsborough built on its many years of experience running learning communities, the career-focused program was new to the college and more advanced than the programs in the other demonstration sites. Also unlike the other sites, heavy emphasis was placed on instruction that highlighted connections between the courses. Field trips and classroom visits by employers were planned to enhance career awareness.
- **The implementation experience was characterized by several start-up problems and, as a result, the program never achieved a “steady state” during the demonstration.** Many of the implementation challenges stemmed from problems with enrolling enough students in the study. For example, some of the learning communities did not fill up and had to be canceled or combined with others.
- **The learning communities program did not have meaningful impacts overall on educational outcomes during the semesters in which students enrolled in the learning community (“program semester”).** For example, the difference between program group students and control group students was not statistically significant with respect to credit accumulation.
- **The learning communities program did not have meaningful impacts on students’ outcomes following the program semester.** In the first semester following the end of the program (“postprogram semester”), 75.7 percent of program group students and 73.7 percent of control group students registered for at least one course. This 2 percentage point difference is not statistically significant.
- **Although the program did not have meaningful impacts on credit accumulation overall, it had a modest but positive impact on credits earned during the program semester for students who had recently transferred from another college and were therefore new to Kingsborough.** Transfer students who were assigned to participate in the career-focused learning communities were more likely to participate in the program than continuing students. They also earned an additional two credits more than transfer students in the control group. This finding is consistent with the theory of learning communities, which posits that students who are new to campus and are not connected with other students and instructors will benefit from the learning community experience.

Emerging Patterns and Lingering Questions

One possible interpretation of these results is that learning communities for second semester students are not effective. However, several circumstances are worth considering before drawing such a conclusion. First, the program at Kingsborough encountered several challenges during implementation, particularly around fully enrolling the learning communities. Second, Kingsborough offers a positive learning environment for all its students, whether or not they are in learning communities, including a rich array of support services and professional development for faculty. In a setting like that, it is hard for any intervention to add value and produce significantly better outcomes than “business as usual.” Finally, the study was designed to measure outcomes such as persistence and credit accumulation, but it did not look at the program’s potential impact on other outcomes that the college considers to be just as important, such as increased mastery of course material and higher-order cognitive skills.

With this report, the Learning Communities Demonstration as well as an evaluation of an earlier learning communities program at Kingsborough Community College have yielded five random assignment studies of learning community programs in community colleges.⁴ Although results vary a bit from program to program, overall the findings show that when learning communities have impacts, they tend to be modest and concentrated in the semester in which the program group students are enrolled in the learning communities. However, the full story of the Learning Communities Demonstration remains to be told. Findings from the evaluations of learning community programs at Merced College and The Community College of Baltimore County, both of which targeted students in need of developmental English, are still forthcoming. Finally, NCPR has plans to follow up all the students in the demonstration for an additional semester; those results will be included in the final report for the demonstration in 2012.

⁴The earlier program at Kingsborough was part of the Opening Doors Demonstration, a multisite study that tested interventions at six community colleges designed to help low-income students stay in school and succeed. See Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo, *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2008).

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

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- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.