Why study learning communities for under-prepared students?

Remediation and developmental programs are the most common means of helping the hundreds of thousands of students who now enter postsecondary education without adequate academic skills. In 2000, about 40 percent of students at community colleges enrolled in a remediation course (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). There are many ways of delivering remedial courses but little rigorous research is published on which methods are most effective.

In 2002, the National Survey of First-Year Academic Practices found that 62 percent of responding colleges enrolled at least some cohorts of students into a learning community (Barefoot, 2002). Given the widespread adoption of learning communities in colleges and universities across the country, evaluation is needed to determine their effects on academic achievement and persistence, particularly for students entering college with low basic skills.

What are the potential benefits of learning communities?

Many authors assert that learning communities offer multiple benefits to students:

- Makes developmental classes more engaging and meaningful
- Allows for deeper understanding and integration of the course materials
- Builds critical and higher-order thinking skills
- Fosters social and intellectual bonds among students and instructors
- Creates a supportive and personalized learning environment
- Strengthens students’ attachment and engagement to the institution
- Socializes students to the college environment
- Increases rates of retention and persistence, course grades, and attainment of postsecondary credentials

Ties with peers and
Other college policies and practices
Student characteristics, background, and circumstances
Contextual variables
Implementation variables
Education and employment outcomes variables
Structural
- Small cohorts
- Linked courses
Content
- Integrated curricula
- Active, collaborative learning
- Extra support
- Overarching theme
Enhanced skills
- Academic
- Collaboration
- Communication
Increased social
- Integration
- Task with peers and faculty
Increased motivation
- Students
- Engagement
- Motivation
- Focus
- Self-esteem
Increased degree or transfer rates
Improved labor market outcomes
Improved academic
- Enrollments
- Improvements
- Completions
- Transfer rates
Higher passing rates on English Skills Tests
Improved degree or transfer rates

In a learning community, a cohort of students takes two or more courses linked by integrated themes and assignments that are developed through ongoing faculty collaboration. Learning communities are intended to foster active and collaborative learning and to create stronger relationships among students and between students and faculty. These elements are theorized to increase students’ motivation and sense of belonging, which in turn drive their effort, learning, persistence, and, ultimately, success.

“Learning communities seek to construct a shared, coherent educational experience [and] to involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote intellectual development.”

Tinto (1998)

In the Opening Doors study, MDRC used an experimental design to evaluate a learning community program at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn.

In the Opening Doors Learning Communities at KCC:

- Incoming freshmen were targeted
- Up to 25 students were grouped together for first semester courses
- Three courses were linked: English, student development, and one standard college course
- Faculty were required to coordinate assignments and discuss student progress

Conclusions to date:

- Students completed more course credits
- Students moved more quickly through developmental English requirements
- Evidence is mixed about whether continued enrollment was improved

Scrivener, et al., (2008.)

For full bibliographic information and to learn more about the Learning Communities Demonstration, please see “The Learning Communities Demonstration: Rationale, Sites and Research Design,” available here and at www.mdrc.org.
Learning Communities Demonstration
Evaluating Learning Communities using an Experimental Design

**Key Questions**

1. **How can learning communities be designed and operated to address the needs of academically underprepared students with low basic English and math skills?** Do such learning communities offer a classroom and college experience that is substantially different from traditional remedial education programs?

2. **What are the effects of learning communities on student achievement, as measured by standardized test scores in English and math, credits earned in developmental and regular college courses, grades, and other outcomes?** What are the effects of learning communities on students’ persistence in higher education?

3. **What do learning communities cost, and how do their costs compare with the costs of standard college programs for students with low basic skills?**

**Study Components**

The Impact Study will measure the effect of participation in learning communities on student achievement.

The Implementation Study is designed to deepen understanding of how the learning communities programs are designed and operated and to describe the classroom experience from the perspective of both teachers and students. The implementation research will also describe the experience of students assigned to the control group. Data will be gathered through interviews, focus groups, classroom observations and a faculty survey.

The Cost Analysis will assess the cost of learning communities and compared them to the cost of regular college programs in which courses are not intentionally linked.

**Impact Measures**

Program and control groups will be followed up to 24 months after random assignment to find out whether being in the learning community results in better outcomes for students. The study will use administrative records to examine the following outcomes:

- Persistence
- Test scores
- Degree attainment
- Graduation
- Completion of developmental sequence
- Credit accumulation
- Transfer to other colleges or universities

**Sites and Samples**

**Target Group:**
First-year and second-year community college students, primarily those in need of developmental courses.

**Participating Institutions:**
- Queensborough Community College (Queens, NY)
- Kingsborough Community College, (Brooklyn, NY)
- Hilsborough Community College (Tampa, FL)
- Community College of Baltimore County (Baltimore, MD)
- Houston Community College System (Houston, TX)
- Merced Community College (Merced, CA)

**Sample Size:**
Each participating college will enroll at least 1,000 students into the study, and randomly assign approximately half to learning communities and half to regular college services.

**Study Intake Process**

1. **Identify eligible students**
2. **Invite to participate in study**
3. **Collect baseline data**

**Random Assignment**

The evaluation uses a lottery-like process to assign students, who have agreed to participate, to one of two groups: a program group that participates in a learning community, or a control group that does not participate in a learning community but has access to whatever regular courses and services are offered to all students. Random Assignment 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; hence, any subsequent differences in educational or other outcomes can be attributed with a high level of confidence to the learning community.

**The Learning Community Models**

The learning communities that were developed by the six colleges in the study in response to the similar needs of their students vary along several dimensions, such as what types of courses are offered, and the level of curricular integration between the courses.

At Queensborough Community College, students take a developmental math course linked to a developmental English course or standard college-level course. Faculty visit each other’s classes and meet before and throughout the semester to coordinate assignments.

At Hilsborough Community College, students take a developmental reading course that is linked with a college success course. The courses are block scheduled and faculty assign common work within links.

At Kingsborough Community College, students take two courses that are required for their occupational major and a 1-credit “integrative seminar” as a group. Faculty in the learning communities coordinate lessons and assignments.

At Community College of Baltimore County, students take a developmental English or reading class linked with a college-level course and supplemented with a Master Learner component. The Master Learner is a faculty member who sits on the college-level course and conducts a weekly, one-hour, noncredit seminar on learning-to-learn in the context of the college-level course.

At Houston Community College System, students take a developmental math course linked with a student success course. Math faculty collaborate with student success course instructors. A tutor is assigned to each math class.

At Merced College, students take a developmental English course linked with either developmental math, developmental reading, or a student success course. Faculty coordinate assignments and several of the links have Supplemental Instructors—trained peer instructors who facilitate voluntary group study sessions.

**Timeline**

- Fall 2007
- Spring 2008
- Fall 2008
- Spring 2009
- Fall 2009
- Spring 2010
- Fall 2010
- Spring 2011

**Cost Analysis**

**Implementation Study**

- Faculty survey
- Early Findings
- Random Assignment

**Key Project Staff:**

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