



Breaking New Ground: An Impact Study of Career-Focused Learning Communities at Kingsborough Community College

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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 (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). Many factors contribute to the low success rates of community college students (Adelman, 2004; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Levin & Calcagno, 2008), 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 often operate learning communities to try to address some of these 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 enroll 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 are 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 (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1975, 1997; Malnarich, 2003; Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 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 Brief summarizes findings from an evaluation of the same title 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 to 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, and was 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 of learning communities. 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, the percentage of students who reenrolled in college the following semester, and credits accumulated.

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 having them passively listen 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. Leaders struggled to fill the learning communities with enough students, having overestimated the number of students who would declare a major that was served by the learning communities, the number of students who needed both courses in the link, or the number of students who would volunteer to enroll in a learning community when given the choice. The college worked tirelessly and creatively to increase enrollment by dropping and adding learning communities, changing the links, and performing aggressive outreach to potential study participants. But in the end, these changes meant that the program never really reached a state of equilibrium, with the result that some learning communities fell short of full implementation.

The learning communities program did not have meaningful impacts overall on educational outcomes during the semesters in which students enrolled in the learning community (the “program semester”). There were no statistically significant differences between program and control group students with respect to their enrollment rates or credit accumulation in the program semester—that is, any differences that showed up were likely a product of chance, not of the learning communities program.

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 were the continuing students. These transfer students 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 who are not connected with other students and instructors will benefit from the learning community experience.

Emerging Patterns and Lingered 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, which includes 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. (The 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 Scrivener, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, & Sommo, 2008.)

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 on all the students in the demonstration for an additional semester; those results will be included in the final report for the demonstration in 2012. Nonetheless, with five rigorous evaluations of this model now close to complete, the evidence is mounting that single-semester learning communities alone may not be enough to overcome the multiple barriers that many students face in achieving their education and career objectives.

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