

A Whole 'Nother World --Students Navigating Community College  
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Each year thousands of young people begin their college careers in community colleges. The lower cost, more convenient location, and flexible admissions standards of community colleges make them an attractive educational alternative for many students, especially those from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, persistence toward degrees among community college students is low. Family responsibilities, poor academic performance, and weak ties to faculty and other students get in the way of students' educational aspirations.

MDRC's Opening Doors Demonstration is measuring the effects of various combinations of curricular reforms, enhanced academic advising, and increased financial aid intended to increase the persistence and improve the academic achievement of students at six community colleges across the United States. To determine the impact of the Opening Doors interventions, the study uses a random assignment design. Students are assigned either to a program group that participates in special classes or receives Opening Doors services or to a comparison group that benefits only from the regular classes and services the college offers to all students.

This qualitative study, a complement to the Opening Doors impact evaluation, asked students about the factors that affect their ability to persist in community college. Interviews with students from both program and comparison groups, most between the ages of 18 and 25, were conducted at two Opening Doors campuses, Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, and Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. The program at Lorain provided enhanced advising services, while the program at Kingsborough used small learning communities to assist participating students. In the winter of 2005, students discussed their preparation for college, academic performance, family and work responsibilities, and connections to faculty, staff, and other students. The key findings are:

- Many younger students (20 and under) reported they attended college largely to please their parents and did not feel a strong personal motivation. In contrast, many students between 21 and 25 said they enrolled to escape low-wage work and ultimately provide a higher standard of living for their families.
- Parenting responsibilities of students with children often interfered with their ability to study and attend class using a traditional schedule.
- Making friends in college was only marginally important to interviewed students.
- At Lorain, the individualized academic advising the program group students received helped them avoid some pitfalls experienced by comparison group students, such as overloading their course schedules.
- At Kingsborough, program group students, who participated in classes with coordinated curricula, reported higher levels of personal attention on assignments from instructors than did comparison group students in traditional classes.

The pitfalls mentioned in finding four included taking too many classes at once, skipping over recommended prerequisites, or arranging inconvenient class schedules. Although some comparison group students also used counseling and advising services, they described them as both less readily available and much less individually tailored than those described by program group students.

### **Future Directions and Program Development**

These findings point to several final questions and areas for further research. First, who needs what? Subgroups, such as parents, full-time workers, older returning students, or younger students coming directly from high school, likely engage in college in ways different from one another. This suggests that there is no one recipe for success. Students need different sets of services at different points in their lives. Future research should explore how programs can determine what each subgroup needs in terms of advising, supports, modes of instruction, studying, completing assignments, and even participating in classes, and deliver services accordingly. The context of students' life challenges, maturity, needs, and competencies should be taken into account to an even greater degree than it has been in the Opening Doors demonstration, and in future community college interventions.

For example, younger students fresh out of high school, such as the students who were interviewed at Kingsborough, may need more career advice and direction — more help with their “planful competence” — and assistance with making their college attendance personal. Perhaps community colleges could provide such students with opportunities to connect a college education to the demands of the “real world,” through volunteer work and internships specially designed for younger students. These types of opportunities, such as organizing a study group or class presentation or a volunteer project in the local community, should give students the chance to exercise responsibility and self-determination

If students' level of maturity and preparation affects their ability and motivation to engage in their studies, what can programs do to best prepare them for college and retain them when they enroll? Is it possible to design programs that impress on youth the importance of college for their futures? Should preparatory interventions be high school-based, pre-high school, or summer “bridge” style? MDRC's early focus groups indicated generally that students understood the importance of college for their futures, although some believed that work experience was more important than a degree in advancing in a career. Younger students who were interviewed, those without much work history, were less sure of college's importance to their future employment opportunities. Older students, especially those who had worked before coming to college, had made that connection.

According to Norton Grubb, students tend to fall into two groups: those who enroll knowing that they need higher education to get better jobs but feeling unsure of what occupation or career they want to pursue; and those with clear aspirations but with education plans not well matched to their goals. These patterns were certainly evident in the students who were interviewed. Even students at Lorain, who were able to state clearly why they were in college, often were uncertain, after they enrolled, of what came next. Perhaps student development courses could be designed, with the maturity and life-

course stage in mind, to more firmly impress on students the link between course work and future careers. A more expansive approach might feature a student development center, where students could take part in career planning classes and receive one-on-one counseling and educational planning, or workshops to help students define career goals and clear academic strategies to achieve them. Programs might also pair students with mentors in a professional field who could advise them on careers as well as on academic matters. For students who may lack personal motivation or clear goals, support systems to help them make the aforementioned connections and then keep them on track are likely important. The findings reported here suggest that developing a coordinated, early-alert system when students' grades are suffering or when they are at risk of academic failure might be an effective tool for keeping all students engaged.

How far should programs go to help students find solutions to the problems that prevent them from being engaged in and staying in college? MDRC's early focus groups reported that students were often unaware of services and supports available to them. Therefore, an important strategy would be simple outreach to make students aware of services, whether at the community college or elsewhere. One-stop centers that house government social services information (or even personnel), campus services and supports, and other community-based supports could both better advertise their services and make access easier for time-pressed students.

These are just some of the questions and implications that emerged from interviews with Opening Doors students. The authors hope that this study can help future iterations of the Opening Doors program continue to improve and better serve students who are taking this critical step in their lives, the first step on the road toward adulthood and future success.