

# Opening Doors to Student Success

## A SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS FROM AN EVALUATION AT SIX COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By Susan Scrivener and Erin Coghlan

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In today's economy, having a postsecondary credential means better jobs and wages. Community colleges, with their open access policies and low tuition, are an important pathway into postsecondary education for nearly half of all U.S. undergraduates. Yet only one-third of all students who enter these institutions with the intent to earn a degree or certificate actually meet this goal within six years. The reasons for this are many, including that community college students are typically underprepared for college-level work, face competing priorities outside of school, and lack adequate financial resources. Recent cuts to higher education spending along with insufficient financial aid and advising at colleges only add to the problem. Ultimately, these factors contribute to unacceptably low persistence and completion rates.

In response to these issues, MDRC launched the Opening Doors Demonstration in 2003 — the first large-scale random assignment study in a community college setting. (Random assignment is widely recognized as the “gold standard” of program evaluation; see the box on page 2 for more details.) The demonstration pursued promising strategies that emerged from focus groups with low-income students, discussions with college administrators, and an extensive

literature review. Partnering with six community colleges across the country, MDRC helped develop and evaluated four distinct programs based on the following approaches: financial incentives, reforms in instructional practices, and enhancements in student services. Colleges were encouraged to focus on one strategy but to think creatively about combining elements of the other strategies to design programs that would help students perform better academically and persist toward degree completion.

Opening Doors provides some of the first rigorous evidence that a range of interventions can, indeed, improve educational outcomes for community college students. The findings spurred some of the colleges to scale up their programs and led to additional large-scale demonstrations to test some of the most promising strategies. More work must be done, however, both to determine whether the early effects can last and to test even bolder reforms. This policy brief describes the different strategies tested, discusses what MDRC has learned from Opening Doors, and

*Opening Doors provides some of the first rigorous evidence that a range of interventions can improve educational outcomes for community college students.*

## WHY IS RANDOM ASSIGNMENT IMPORTANT?

Many of MDRC's studies use a random assignment research design to measure the effectiveness of policies or programs created to help students succeed. This approach — which is unusual in higher education research — involves a lottery-like process to place students into either a program group that receives a new or enhanced service or intervention or a control group that receives the regular college services. Random assignment ensures that all characteristics of students in both the program and control groups are the same at the start of the study. By tracking both groups over time and comparing their outcomes, MDRC is able to determine the impact or “value added” of the program. Random assignment is a rigorous method of evaluation and produces results that policymakers and practitioners can readily understand and trust.

offers some suggestions to policymakers and practitioners for moving forward.

### THE OPENING DOORS PROGRAMS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON STUDENTS

The Opening Doors Demonstration tested four distinct programs targeting four different groups of community college students. The initial positive findings provide a good starting point for building even better programs in the future: Financial incentives tied to academic performance helped students do better and stay in school; learning communities, an instructional reform, improved some academic outcomes for freshmen; and two different enhanced student services programs improved academic outcomes. The programs and their key effects are described below and summarized in Table 1. (For more information on the programs, see the full reports on MDRC's Web site, [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).)

#### *Financial Incentives*

#### **Performance-Based Scholarships Improved Students' Academic Outcomes**

Inadequate financial aid is a barrier to

academic progress and success for many college students. Common criticisms of financial aid include that government aid has not kept up with the rising costs of college attendance and that the various aid programs sometimes fail to direct support to the neediest students. Many students are misinformed about aid that is available to them, and end up working in low-paying jobs, detracting from their focus to complete their degree. Some experts say that the financial aid system does not do enough to promote high academic achievement, persistence, or completion.

Focusing on these issues, two colleges in the New Orleans area tested a program as part of the Opening Doors Demonstration that offered a *performance-based scholarship* in which students received money only if they met certain academic benchmarks. Students could choose to spend the funds on non-tuition expenses; this flexibility was an important feature and something that the program was explicitly designed to test. This model attempts to help address financial needs while providing an incentive for students to perform well in their courses.

The Louisiana program offered students up to \$1,000 for each of two semesters for a total of \$2,000. The scholarship was paid in three increments throughout the semester if students enrolled at least half time and maintained a “C” (2.0) or better grade point average (GPA). Program counselors monitored academic performance and disbursed the scholarship checks directly to students. Notably, the scholarships were paid in addition to federal Pell Grants and other financial aid. Because the program was funded with state welfare funds, eligibility was limited to low-income parents (though they did not need to be on welfare). The

**TABLE 1. Summary of Opening Doors Programs and Effects**

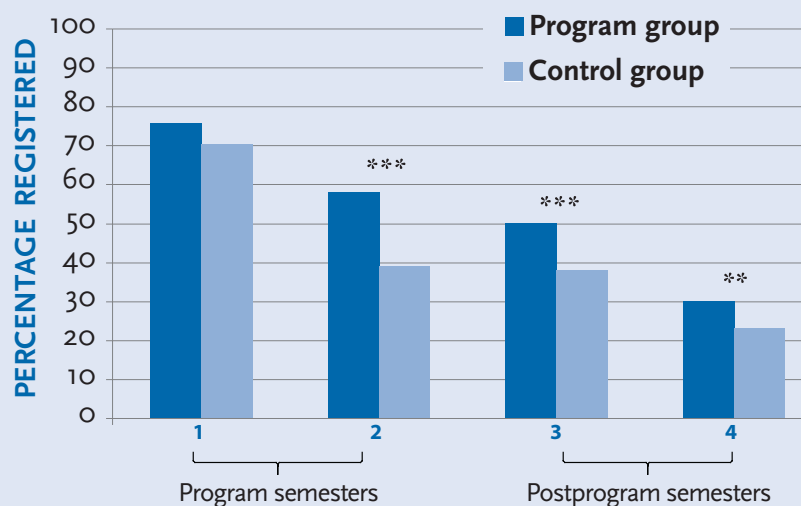
	PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION	EFFECTS
<b>FINANCIAL INCENTIVES</b>	<b>Performance-Based Scholarship</b>	Up to <b>\$1,000</b> for each of two semesters if students enrolled at least half time and maintained a “C” or better GPA. <b>Counselors</b> monitored students. Targeted low-income parents.	Students more likely to enroll <b>full time</b> , persist in college, and earn more <b>credits</b> .
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL REFORM</b>	<b>Learning Communities</b>	Program for incoming freshmen, most requiring developmental English. <b>Linked courses</b> ; provided enhanced <b>counseling, tutoring, and a text book voucher</b> .	Increased number of <b>courses passed and credits earned</b> , and moved students more quickly through <b>developmental English requirements</b> .
<b>ENHANCED STUDENT SERVICES</b>	<b>Enhanced Academic Counseling</b>	Tested enhanced academic <b>counseling</b> and a <b>modest stipend</b> .	Modest impact on <b>registration</b> during second semester and first semester after program ended.
	<b>Enhanced Targeted Services</b>	Program for students on probation; linked <b>student success course</b> to <b>Success Center</b> visits.	Increased <b>credits earned and GPA</b> , and moved students off <b>probation</b> .

research sample was mostly African-American single mothers. Students in the study’s control (or comparison) group in Louisiana could not receive the Opening Doors scholarship, but they had access to standard financial aid and the colleges’ standard counseling.

The evaluation found that tying financial aid to academic performance can generate large positive effects — some of the largest MDRC has found in its higher education studies. The program substantially improved students’ academic outcomes, and the positive effects continued through the third and fourth semesters of the study, when most students were no longer eligible for the scholarship. Students in the study’s program group were more likely to attend college full time. They also earned better grades and more credits. As Figure 1 (page 4) shows, the program group students registered at higher rates than the control group students throughout

the study. For example, during the second program semester, the registration rate among students in the program group was 57 percent, compared with 39 percent of the students in the control group — a statistically significant difference (meaning that the difference was not likely a result of chance). Making scholarship payments contingent on academic benchmarks succeeded on two important fronts: Low-income students received additional financial assistance *and* improved their academic performance.

Just after the Opening Doors program ended, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast region; the colleges involved in the study shut down temporarily, and many students in the study moved away. As a result, MDRC was not able to study the long-term impacts of the program. However, the very promising findings from Louisiana spurred MDRC to launch the Performance-Based Scholarship

**FIGURE 1.****Louisiana Performance-Based Scholarships***Program Helped Keep More Students in School, Even After Program Ended*

\*\*\* = Statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

\*\* = Statistically significant at the 5 percent level. See box on page 5 for more detail.

Demonstration to test variations of the program (see box on page 9).

### **Instructional Reforms**

#### **Learning Communities Provided Initial Boost for Freshmen**

*Learning communities* are operated by colleges across the nation to promote students' involvement and persistence in school. Learning communities typically place groups of students in two or more linked courses, often with mutually reinforcing themes and assignments. They seek to build peer relationships, intensify connections to faculty, and deepen understanding of coursework.

Learning communities commonly target students in developmental (or remedial) education, who enter community colleges underprepared for college-level work. Recent data indicate that 42 percent of community college freshmen enroll in at least one

developmental reading, writing, or math course, designed to bring students' basic skills to college-level standards. Many developmental students drop out of those classes and only a minority ever receive a degree. Strategies to help developmental students succeed are critical in the overall effort to increase graduation rates.

Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, launched a learning community for incoming freshmen. Groups of up to 25 students took three classes together during their first semester: an English class; a standard college course, such as health or psychology; and a student success course that covered topics such as time

management, study skills, and college rules. Students' English classes were based on their proficiency: about 7 of every 10 students in the program took developmental English, and the rest took college-level English. Most learning community instructors met regularly to coordinate assignments and discuss student progress. The program provided enhanced academic counseling, tutoring, and a voucher for text books. Students in the study's control group could not participate in the learning community but had access to the college's standard courses and services. The students in the study were young (mostly 17 to 20 years old) and diverse in terms of race and ethnicity.

MDRC tracked students' outcomes for two years. The learning communities provided an initial boost for students, but most of the effects diminished over time. During the first semester, program group students passed more courses and earned more credits than

control group students. They also moved more quickly through developmental English requirements: That semester, more program group members took and passed the English skills assessment tests that are required for graduation or transfer. Notably, the control group members had not “caught up” in terms of taking and passing these tests two years later. Program group students felt more integrated at school and more engaged in their courses and with their instructors and fellow students. Despite this improvement in performance, the program did not have an immediate effect on students’ persistence in college. There was some indication, however, that program group students were more likely to be enrolled in college at the end of the two-year study period. MDRC is still following the Kingsborough students in order to examine their longer-term persistence and graduation and is managing the Learning Communities Demonstration to see whether other types of learning community programs will be effective (see box on page 9).

Encouraged by the early findings from the study, Kingsborough scaled up its learning communities program. Today, the Opening Doors learning communities serve the vast majority of incoming freshmen at the college.

### **Enhanced Student Services**

#### **Reforms Can Help Improve Students’ Outcomes**

*Student services* — such as academic counseling, career counseling, tutoring, study skills training, and personal counseling — help students navigate through school and can play a critical role in helping them succeed. Unfortunately, resources for these services at community colleges are somewhat limited. For example, student-to-counselor ratios are often more than 1,000 to 1, restricting the assistance students receive. In

## WHAT DO THE ASTERISKS MEAN IN THE FIGURES?

Once students are assigned to a program group or control group, MDRC follows their outcomes and applies a two-tailed t-test to determine the statistical significance of the difference between the research groups. The test is conducted to determine the probability that the observed difference occurred by chance. In the figures in this brief, the number of asterisks indicates the probability of observing the same or larger differences if the program had no impact. In short, the more asterisks, the more confident one can be in the results.

**Statistical significance levels are indicated as:**  
 \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

the Opening Doors Demonstration, colleges tested two different enhanced student services programs intended to give more intensive and personalized assistance to students: one program provided enhanced academic counseling for students early in their college career, and another provided an array of enhanced services for students on academic probation.

#### ***Enhanced Academic Counseling Had Modest Short-Term Effects.***

Two colleges in northern Ohio — Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College — ran an enhanced academic counseling program. Students in the program group at the colleges were assigned to one of a team of counselors, with whom they were expected to meet at least two times per semester for two semesters to discuss academic progress and resolve any issues that might affect their schooling. Each counselor worked with far fewer students than the regular college counselors — an average of fewer than 160 students, compared with more than 1,000 for the regular counselors. This facilitated more frequent, intensive, and personal contact. Students were also eligible for a \$150 stipend

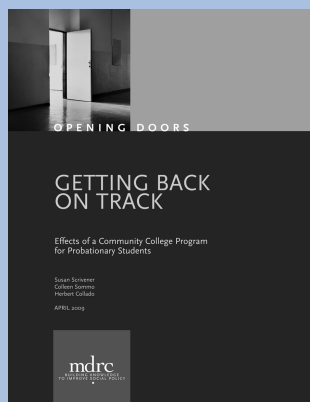
## MAJOR REPORTS FROM THE OPENING DOORS DEMONSTRATION

*More Guidance, Better Results? Three-Year Effects of an Enhanced Student Services Program at Two Community Colleges (2009)*

*Getting Back on Track: Effects of a Community College Program for Probationary Students (2009)*

*Rewarding Persistence: Effects of a Performance-Based Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents (2009)*

*A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College (2008)*



slightly more likely to register for school during the first semester after the program ended. Beyond that point, the program did not meaningfully affect students' outcomes.

**Targeted Services Helped Students Move Off Academic Probation.** Chaffey College, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, operated a program that provided enhanced student services to probationary students to help them do better in their classes and get off probation. Many community college students end up on academic probation because of poor grades or inadequate academic progress. When Chaffey's program began, about one of every five students at the college was on probation. Probation can prevent students from getting financial aid and can eventually lead to dismissal from college. Little is known about how to help probationary students get back on track and increase their chances of completing their studies.

Chaffey's Opening Doors program offered a student success course, taught by a college counselor, that covered topics such as personal motivation, time management, study skills, and college expectations. Students were expected to meet with their instructors outside of class for academic counseling and to visit the college's *Success Centers*, which provide supplementary individualized or group instruction in reading, writing, and math. Students in the control group at Chaffey were not targeted for any special services but had access to the college's standard student services and courses. Students in the study were relatively "traditional" — most were young, unmarried, and did not have any children.

Chaffey ran two versions of the program. The original version of the program lasted one semester and was voluntary. Only about half

for two semesters (totaling \$300). The stipend, paid in two increments after meetings with a counselor, was designed to be an incentive to draw students into counseling. Students in the control group received standard college services and no Opening Doors stipend. The Ohio colleges targeted low-income students who were new to the college or who were continuing and had completed fewer than 13 credits. The students were "nontraditional" — most were in their mid-twenties, and many were working and had children.

*The programs helped groups that were facing substantial challenges: students in developmental education and probationary students as well as "nontraditional" students.*

MDRC tracked students' outcomes for three years. The enhanced academic counseling program generated modest positive effects that dissipated once the program ended.

Specifically, compared with the control group, a somewhat higher proportion of the program group returned to school the second semester and they earned more credits. Program group members were also

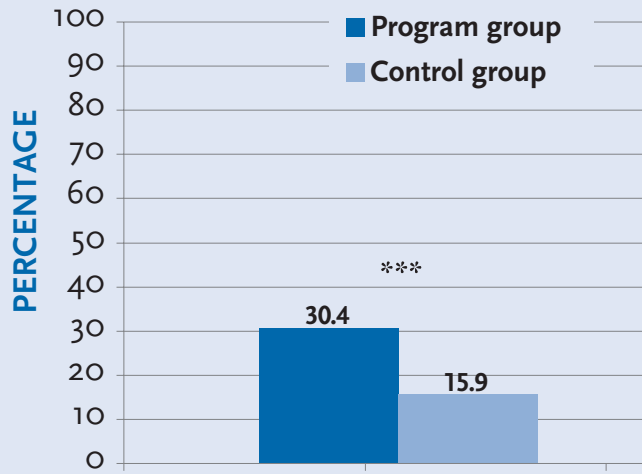
of the students in the study’s program group enrolled in the student success course, and the program did not have any meaningful effect on students’ academic outcomes. College administrators and staff then reformed the program, extending the student success course to two semesters. Program group students were told that they were *required* to attend the course, and about three-fourths did so. The requirement to participate was important in that it got students to take part in the program who would not have volunteered for services. Over two semesters, the revised program increased students’ cumulative GPAs and, as Figure 2 shows, almost doubled the proportion that moved off probation. The program did not, however, increase persistence during the follow-up period. MDRC is still tracking students in order to look at the longer-term effects of the revised program (see box on page 9).

After seeing the promising results from the study, Chaffey institutionalized the revised version of the program. The college has since provided targeted enhanced services to thousands of probationary students. Chaffey also developed a version of the program for new students identified through the college’s assessment process as being at risk of experiencing difficulties.

**LESSONS FROM OPENING DOORS**

The Opening Doors Demonstration was the first large-scale random assignment evaluation of areas clearly ripe for reform, and the initial findings provide a good starting point for building reliable knowledge. Although much is still unknown about the right combination of ingredients, the results show that something can be done to improve

**FIGURE 2.**  
**Chaffey Enhanced Services**  
*Program Almost Doubled Proportion of Students Who Moved Off Probation Over Two Semesters*



\*\*\* = Statistically significant at the 1 percent level.  
 See box on page 5 for more detail.

the dismal statistics on persistence and student success at many community colleges. The findings from Opening Doors suggest the following lessons:

- **Reforms in higher education practices and policies can help students succeed — even nontraditional students.** When MDRC’s demonstration began, this was an open question. Encouragingly, all of the programs tested yielded at least some positive changes for students. It is notable that the programs helped groups that were facing substantial challenges: students in developmental education and probationary students as well as “nontraditional” students, including low-income parents and working adults.
- **Short-term enhancements can generate short-term effects but are not likely to generate longer-term gains.** The programs tested in Opening Doors lasted one or two semesters, and, for the most part, the

positive effects for students dissipated after the enhancements ended. (The notable exception is the performance-based scholarship program in Louisiana.) This suggests that short-term interventions will likely not act as an “inoculation” against the challenges facing many community college students.

- **Single-focus, “light-touch” student service interventions can make a difference for students but may not be robust enough to substantially improve outcomes.** The enhanced academic counseling program in Ohio represents the “lightest touch” of the interventions tested as part of Opening Doors. The other programs offered more program components, more intensive services, or both, and generated more substantial changes in students’ outcomes.
- **Financial incentives can influence students’ behavior.** Much research has shown that financial work incentives can increase employment, and Opening Doors

*Much work remains to find programmatic solutions that will markedly improve students’ persistence and graduation rates.*

provides evidence that financial incentives can be effective in higher education settings, too. The performance-based scholarship in Louisiana was the largest financial incentive in Opening Doors, and it substantially improved students’ academic outcomes. The modest stipend in Ohio served as an incentive to get students to see their counselors, and program group students did in fact complete more counselor visits than students in the study’s control group. It’s important to note that the financial incentives were given directly to students, who had the flexibility to spend the funds on non-tuition expenses.

- **Requirements can increase participation and improve student outcomes.** Chaffey’s original program for probationary students was voluntary and had low participation rates and no meaningful effects on student outcomes. The revised program, in which students were told that the program was mandatory, generated much higher participation rates and moved many students off probation. Kingsborough’s program, which moved students more quickly through developmental English, required most students to take a developmental English course as part of the learning community. The findings from these two sites suggest that requirements can play an important role in increasing students’ engagement and success.

The Opening Doors Demonstration was only a first step in rigorously evaluating select strategies in community colleges, and much work remains to find programmatic solutions that will markedly improve students’ persistence and graduation rates.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Rates of persistence and graduation in community colleges remain stubbornly low, but the current national focus on increasing these rates is encouraging. The Obama Administration, state governments, higher education institutions, and foundations have made a strong push to increase the community college graduation rate. National movements, such as Achieving the Dream, and government agencies are encouraging colleges to use data on student outcomes to make better-informed institutional and programming decisions. And community colleges themselves are willing partners in developing and testing promising practices.

The Opening Doors Demonstration provides encouraging evidence that changes in



community college practices can lead to improvements in student outcomes. Taken together, however, the studies also suggest that more work needs to be done to identify effective strategies that will lead to significant increases in college completion rates. MDRC is continuing to follow students in two of the Opening Doors colleges (Kingsborough and Chaffey) to understand their long-term trajectories and identify how many ultimately earn degrees. MDRC is also doing additional research on learning communities and performance-based scholarships to learn how these important interventions work in different settings and with other groups of students. Finally, MDRC is conducting research on the cost of the Kingsborough learning communities program, some other learning communities, Chaffey's enhanced services, and performance-based scholarships to help guide policymakers and college administrators who may want to adopt these reforms.

Although the results from Opening Doors are encouraging, the effects for students were for the most part modest and they often diminished once the services ended. Programs that last longer, are more comprehensive and multifaceted, or substantially change the way colleges do business may have more potential to markedly improve students' outcomes and lead to increased persistence and graduation. Some promising areas for exploration include:

- **New reforms in financial aid.** Financial aid remains a barrier for many community college students. Promising reforms include providing better information to students about financial aid, simplifying the application process, and restructuring the way aid is delivered so that it rewards student progress and helps students

## WHAT'S NEXT AT MDRC

The Opening Doors Demonstration is not over. MDRC is collecting additional data at Kingsborough Community College (learning communities) and Chaffey College (enhanced services to probationary students) to identify long-term effects on persistence and graduation. A study of the cost of programs will also be conducted. Reports will be released beginning in 2011.

Building on promising findings from Kingsborough's learning communities and Louisiana's performance-based scholarship, MDRC launched two full-scale demonstrations:

- The Learning Communities Demonstration involves six colleges across the country through the National Center for Postsecondary Research. The goal of the project is to test the effectiveness of learning communities in increasing academic achievement (including the completion of developmental education requirements), retention in college, degree attainment, and other outcomes. Five of the six models of learning communities target incoming students in need of developmental math or English, and the sixth model targets continuing students in several career tracks. Findings will continue to be released over the next few years.
- The Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration evaluates whether performance-based scholarships are an effective way to improve persistence among low-income college students in different geographical locations with various amounts of monies over different durations. The program is targeted to low-income students with high unmet need, based on the cost of attendance and gaps in state financial aid. The goal is to inform changes in state policy, if warranted by the research findings. The first report from the demonstration was published in fall 2010.

MDRC is also conducting an evaluation of a comprehensive program at the City University of New York that combines enhanced financial aid, learning communities, and enhanced student services, called Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). And MDRC is conducting other studies on developmental education, student services, and financial aid.

*For more information, please visit MDRC's Web site.*

## FUNDERS OF THE OPENING DOORS DEMONSTRATION

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
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- The James Irvine Foundation
- The Joyce Foundation
- KnowledgeWorks Foundation
- Lumina Foundation for Education
- MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health
- MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood
- National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
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balance school and outside work obligations. Providing more aid and providing flexible aid that can be used on non-tuition expenses may substantially help low-income students who struggle to cover their expenses and end up dropping out of school. Finally, aid can be used to strengthen connections between college and careers, such as providing work-study jobs in students' fields of study.

- **Innovations in developmental education.** Much work is left to be done in improving developmental education. Contextualized approaches that integrate basic English and math instruction with occupational skills or subject matter that students want to learn — as Washington State is doing with its I-BEST program — show promise. Another idea is to provide instruction in short, focused modules, rather than in semester-long classes. Programs that accelerate students' progression through a sequence of developmental courses — getting them more quickly to credit-bearing classes — are promising reforms. Other innovations include reforming the skills

assessment and placement of students in developmental education to better identify their true skills and needs.

- **Initiatives that aim to reduce the number of students who require developmental education.** Some states and colleges are developing interventions to identify and address problems of low basic skills before students even get to college. Early assessment programs, for example, test the skills of high school students with the same assessment instruments used at college entry. Students who are underprepared can strengthen their skills *before* they begin college. Dual enrollment or early college programs allow high school students to enroll in college courses and earn college credits. And summer bridge programs provide instruction during the weeks before college begins in the fall.

While building on promising programs and exploring new innovations, it is important that colleges continue to enhance their collection and analysis of student data. Through funding and policy reforms, state governments can

incentivize innovation and reward colleges for improving student success. Many states have already begun to tie part of colleges' funding to student outcomes, including graduation rates and intermediate outcomes like moving from developmental-level to college-level courses. Government, foundations, and other organizations can support the expansion of practices already proven to be effective both through funding and by providing information on how to implement specific strategies.

The U.S. economy depends on a skilled, educated workforce. The nation's community colleges are central in preparing

this workforce, but there is a crisis in completion rates at these institutions. According to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, the U.S. economy will have 22 million new jobs for college-educated workers by 2018; if we continue at our current pace, we will be 3 million workers short of filling this capacity. The Opening Doors Demonstration offers a good start to building reliable evidence about what works to improve academic outcomes, but much more needs to be done to ensure that the right reforms are implemented at scale to open doors to better jobs and success for all students.

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CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

## Opening Doors to Student Success

A Synthesis of Findings from an Evaluation at Six Community Colleges



Only one-third of all students who enter community colleges with the intent to earn a degree or certificate actually meet this goal within six years. MDRC launched the Opening Doors Demonstration in 2003 — the first large-scale random assignment study in a community college setting — to tackle this problem. Partnering with six community colleges, MDRC helped develop and evaluated programs based on the following approaches: financial incentives, reforms in instructional practices, and enhancements in student services. Opening Doors provides some of the first rigorous evidence that a range of interventions can, indeed, improve educational outcomes for community college students. This policy brief describes the different strategies tested, discusses what has been learned from Opening Doors, and offers some suggestions to policymakers and practitioners for moving forward.