

Enhanced Academic Counseling for Community College Students

Tags: Degree attainment, student services, improving achievement, persistence, retention

Description of Strategy

Beginning in 2003, MDRC partnered with two community colleges in Ohio, Lorain County Community College in Elyria and Owens Community College in Toledo, to design and evaluate a program aimed at improving academic outcomes for low-income community college students by providing them with enhanced student services. There are many possible ways to enhance student services. The program in Ohio, which students participated in for two semesters, offered students improved advising with specially-trained counselors and a small stipend given for meeting with those counselors. Ohio's program was one of several approaches aiming to improve the success rates of community college students that MDRC studied in the multi-site Opening Doors Demonstration.

MDRC evaluated Opening Doors Ohio using a random assignment design. Students who expressed interest in the program were randomly assigned either to a program group, where they had the opportunity to receive the services and stipend, or a control group, where they were offered the college's usual services. Random assignment ensures that students in both the program and the control groups are similar in terms of observable characteristics like age, gender, or race, as well as harder-to-observe characteristics like academic experiences before college or personal motivation. By following both groups and comparing their outcomes, the evaluation provides strong evidence of the "value added," or impact, of the program on student achievement.

The Ohio program targeted low-income students between the ages of 18 and 34 who were either (a) beginning freshmen or (b) continuing students with fewer than 13 credits who had experienced academic difficulties, namely failing or withdrawing from courses, in their first semester. The two colleges identified eligible students and invited them to participate in the study. From there, students were randomly assigned to either the program group, which was eligible to receive the Opening Doors Ohio program services, or the control group, which was eligible to receive standard college services and no stipend. MDRC used school transcript data and a survey given to students approximately 12 months after random assignment to assess academic and social outcomes for both groups of students.

Program Design and Theory of Change

The treatment consisted of two parts. The first was enhanced student services, primarily enhanced academic counseling. Program group students were assigned to an academic counselor specially trained for Opening Doors. Opening Doors counselors had much smaller caseloads than the counselors available to the general student body, meaning that they were able to have more frequent and more intensive contact with Opening Doors students than is normally possible.

Students were expected to meet with their counselor at least two times per semester, once at the beginning of the term and once mid-semester, for both of the two semesters that they participated in the Opening Doors program. To encourage this, the program included a small stipend, which was paid in two installments per semester, each occurring after each student had met with his or her counselor. The stipend provided students with up to \$150 per semester for a maximum possible total of \$300 over the course of the program.

MDRC theorized that increasing students' interaction with student services would lead those students to feel more integrated with the school, leading to more participation in and engagement with college life, improving both their academic and social experience. These students would then be more likely to stay in school and complete a degree. Additionally, active participation in student services might result in students getting more information about and make greater use of academic tutoring, career counseling, psychological help, and other support services the colleges offer. These students might be more likely to persist in school and therefore have better academic outcomes than those who do not know about or are unable to access these resources.

Program Implementation

MDRC's evaluation of the Ohio Opening Doors program found that, as designed, its academic counseling services far exceeded the standard student services at the two colleges. Specifically, the Opening Doors counseling was more intensive, comprehensive and personalized than the colleges' standard counseling services. In addition to occurring more frequently, the Opening Doors counseling covered a broader range of topics, not limited just to academic issues but also including financial aid, career and personal issues. The lower counselor caseloads for Opening Doors counselors permitted more personalized and frequent counseling for students. While average student-to-counselor ratios for these schools are upwards of 1000:1, the Opening Doors counselors had caseloads of 81:1 at Lorain and 157:1 at Owens.

As noted above, the Opening Doors program provided students with a stipend for meeting with their counselors. Based on interviews with students and staff, the enhanced advising was viewed as more important for students than the stipend. However, the stipend likely helped draw students to that service. It is likely that some Opening Doors students continued to have some contact with their counselors and receive some special Opening Doors assistance after the two semesters of the program ended. However, by and large, the program services for students concluded after two semesters.

Results

The program did not substantially affect academic outcomes in the first program semester. Both program group and control group students had similar registration rates and earned about the same average number of credits. In the second semester, however, the program increased students' registration rates and both the average number of credits attempted and

credits earned. Program group students' registration rate was seven percentage points higher than control group students' rate, and they attempted almost one more credit. Program group students also earned an average of half a credit more than control students that semester. The increased registration rate for program students remained in the first semester after the program ended, but dissipated in later semesters.

Lessons for Future Programs

Although the program produced effects during the program semesters and the first post-program semester, indicating a short-term benefit to students, the program did not have meaningful, lasting effects on treatment group students throughout their full community college careers. One possible explanation for this is that a two-semester program duration is too short. To see persistent impacts, program efforts must be sustained. Under this logic, one possible improvement is to implement a program with a similar package of services for more than two semesters. Another possible improvement may be to add other academic services, such as tutoring or study skills training, to the package. Finally, a more comprehensive program might include on-campus child care or transportation assistance, services that can help students with practical barriers to persistence.

It is important to consider that enhanced student services alone cannot address all of the barriers to academic success. Notable barriers untouched by this intervention include the steep financial cost of attending college and the lack of preparation for college-level work among some students. However, a package of enhanced student services seems to be able to provide valuable assistance to many low-income community college students.

For more information, see Scrivener, Susan and Michael J. Weiss. 2009. *More Guidance, Better Results? Three-Year Effects of an Enhanced Student Services Program at Two Community Colleges*. New York: MDRC. www.mdrc.org.

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