

Learning Communities

Tags: Degree Attainment, Developmental/Remedial Education, Improving Achievement, Learning Communities, Persistence, Retention.

Description of Strategy

Community college learning communities, which consist of small cohorts of students who are enrolled together in two or more linked courses in a single semester, are a widely-used strategy aimed at improving student outcomes. Unlike instructors of “stand-alone” courses, learning community instructors are expected to communicate with each other to align their syllabi, write integrated curricula, and prepare common assignments. Instructors use pedagogical practices to encourage active and collaborative learning, taking advantage of the stronger relationships among students in the class that occur through the cohorting experience. Learning communities also often include enhanced supports, such as tutoring and extra advising.

The theory of change for learning communities predicts that participating students will not only form stronger relationships with each other and with their instructors, but that they will also engage more deeply with the content of the courses when they see a context for what they are learning. They will therefore be more likely to pass their courses, persist from semester to semester, and graduate with a credential. Consistent with the theory of change, prior research on learning communities provides some evidence that participation in a learning community is related to students reporting increased levels of engagement, more meaningful relationships with other students, and improved higher-order thinking skills. Studies also suggest that learning communities may have modest positive associations with outcomes such as course completion and persistence in college. While these findings are encouraging, the design of these studies leaves open the question of whether the effects were due to the program itself or to pre-program differences in the characteristics of those students who chose to enroll in the program.

Evidence

MDRC’s Opening Doors Demonstration and the Learning Communities Demonstration used a random assignment research design to test this strategy as implemented in six community colleges around the country. Random assignment ensures that students in both the program and the control groups are similar in terms of observable characteristics, such as age, gender, and race, as well as harder-to-observe characteristics, such as academic experiences before college and personal motivation. By following both groups and comparing their outcomes, the evaluation provides strong evidence of the “value added,” or *impact*, of learning communities on student achievement.

As part of MDRC’s multisite Opening Doors Demonstration, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, tested a one-semester learning community program. The program placed freshmen, most of whom needed developmental English and/or developmental math courses, into groups of up to 25 students who took three classes together during their first semester: an English course, an academic course required for the students’ major, and a freshman

orientation course. It also provided counseling, tutoring, and textbook vouchers. From fall 2003 to spring 2005, over 1,500 students were randomly assigned to either the program group, where they had the opportunity to participate in the program and enroll in a learning community, or the control group, where they were offered the college's usual services but could not enroll in the learning communities program.

The Kingsborough study found that the program improved students' college experiences and some short-term educational outcomes, including credit attainment and progress through developmental English requirements. In part as a result of the early Kingsborough findings, the National Center for Postsecondary Research, of which MDRC is a partner, launched the Learning Communities Demonstration at six colleges. Five of these institutions — the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in Maryland, Hillsborough Community College in Florida, Houston Community College in Texas, Merced College in California, and Queensborough Community College in New York — operated learning communities for students in need of developmental courses in English or math. The targeted developmental course was linked with a “student success course,” another developmental course, or a college-level course. The sixth program evaluated as part of the Learning Communities Demonstration consisted of career-focused learning communities at Kingsborough; these learning communities did not include developmental courses. As in *Opening Doors*, random assignment was used to estimate impacts for each program. From 2007 to 2009, approximately 1,000 students were randomly assigned at each college, about half of whom had the opportunity to enroll in a learning community.

Key Findings

Impacts on Academic Outcomes

The results from the five Learning Communities Demonstration programs targeted to students in developmental education, as well as the subsample of the Kingsborough *Opening Doors* students referred to developmental English, were pooled to understand the effects of learning communities for students in developmental education. Analysis of data from three semesters at each college (one program semester and two follow-up semesters) revealed that learning communities for developmental education students, on average, produced a small impact on credits earned in the targeted subject (English or mathematics), no discernible impact on credits outside that subject, and a small effect on total credits earned. No effects were seen on semester-to-semester persistence. The Kingsborough *Opening Doors* program showed somewhat larger effects than the other sites on credits earned in the targeted subject in the three semesters of follow up.

The larger early impacts from the Kingsborough site also provided a rationale for following the students at Kingsborough longer (both those with and without developmental English needs). After six years, more students in this learning communities program earned a degree (35.9 percent) than students in the control group (31.3 percent — an impact of 4.6 percentage points). The program also had a positive overall impact on credit accumulation. The effect on degrees was most evident for students who placed into college-level English at baseline, alt-

though there is evidence that the program also positively affected long-term outcomes for students with the greatest developmental needs in English.

Cost

According to cost data from three of the colleges, the direct cost of a learning community incurred during the semester in which the learning community is operated is about \$570 per student. While this cost is not trivial, colleges may decide that the gain of half a credit is worth the additional costs, particularly if the program also leads to other benefits for students, instructors, or colleges. The Kingsborough program was more costly than the CCBC and Houston programs. However, the long-term impacts at Kingsborough showed that the investment proved worthwhile: it increased the number of students who earned a college degree, resulting in a cost per degree earned among program group members that was 2.6 percent less than the cost per degree earned among control group members.

Implementation

Learning communities are difficult to operate, especially at scale. While there are some notable exceptions, the number of learning communities students served each semester at community colleges tends to remain small. Not surprisingly, then, at some of the study colleges, program implementation was uneven in the first semester or two as the colleges worked to scale up and stabilize the programs. Implementing and expanding a learning communities program required significant management and administrative support. Additionally, recruiting and supporting enough motivated faculty was an ongoing challenge at most colleges.

One component of the learning community model, curricular integration, proved to be particularly difficult to implement widely and deeply. Although curricular integration became more prevalent over time at all six sites, there was great variation within colleges, and integration was rarely implemented to its full potential.

Several factors may have contributed to the increased success of Kingsborough's Opening Doors program. Most notably, Opening Doors Learning Communities were particularly comprehensive: they linked three courses and provided enhanced counseling, tutoring, and textbook vouchers. These supports far surpassed those offered by any of the other programs studied, which may have contributed to the relatively large impacts of the Kingsborough program. In addition, the Opening Doors Learning Communities evaluation explicitly recruited students intending to enroll in college full-time and included both developmental and college-ready English students. The Opening Doors program also had unusually strong support from college administrators, from the president down to department chairs. Faculty teaching in learning communities "got the message" that their work was important and valued. Thus, although most typical one-semester learning communities for developmental education students are not likely to lead to large effects on student outcomes, a program with additional supports can have longer-term impacts.

For more information, see

- Sommo, Colleen, Alexander Mayer, Timothy Rudd, and Dan Cullinan. 2012. *Commencement Day: Six-Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Communities Program at Kingsborough Community College*. New York: MDRC.
- Visher, Mary G., Emily Schneider, Heather Wathington, and Herbert Collado. 2010. *Scaling Up Learning Communities: The Experience of Six Community Colleges*. New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/550/full.pdf>.
- Visher, Mary G., and Jedediah Teres. 2011. *Breaking New Ground: An Impact Study of Career-Focused Learning Communities at Kingsborough Community College*. New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/604/full.pdf>
- Visher, Mary G., Michael J. Weiss, Evan Weissman, Timothy Rudd, and Heather Wathington. 2012. *The Effects of Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Education: A Synthesis of Findings from Six Community Colleges*. New York: MDRC.

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