

## Success Courses for Students on Academic Probation

**Tags:** Adult education, degree attainment, improving achievement, persistence, personalized instruction, retention.

### Background

Success courses — also called student development, study skills, or new student orientation courses — are designed to help students develop the skills necessary to succeed at college. Students enrolled in success courses learn how to take notes, take tests, manage their time, explore their learning styles and develop plans for college and work. Non-experimental research has found an association between students taking a success course and positive outcomes, such as persistence in school and academic performance.

Chaffey College in California developed a program with a success course as its core, designed to improve the chances of college success for students who were on academic probation because of poor grades or inadequate academic progress. The program went through two iterations: Opening Doors, which began in fall 2005, and Enhanced Opening Doors, which began the following year. The Enhanced Opening Doors program comprised three core components:

- A success course. Taught by a college counselor, this “guidance” course, which students in the program were told they had to take, was designed to help probationary students clarify their personal goals, understand college rules and regulations, and develop better study skills.
- Visits to the Success Centers. As part of the success course, students were expected to complete five visits to the college’s “Success Centers,” where all Chaffey students could get extra help in reading, writing, and math.
- Improved counseling. The instructors of the success courses were expected to work with students during class time and to meet with them outside of class to provide extra advising and counseling as needed.

MDRC’s evaluations of Chaffey’s program used a random assignment design. Students on academic probation who agreed to participate in the program were randomly assigned either to a program group, where they could receive program resources, or a control group, where they were offered the college’s usual services (which included the Success Centers and success course, but not the complete package of program resources described above). 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.

### Key Findings

The evaluation of the first Chaffey program did not observe any meaningful positive impacts to academic outcomes during or after the program semesters. However, the evaluation of the

second program at Chaffey, referred to as the “Enhanced Opening Doors” program, found that the success course, combined with other program resources,

- **Increased students’ GPAs.** After two program semesters, 30.3% of students in the program group had a degree-applicable GPA over 2.0, compared with 23.2% of students in the control group. Students’ degree-applicable GPAs do not include credits from the success course.
- **Moved students off of academic probation.** 30.4% of program group students achieved good academic standing during the program semesters, compared with only 15.9% of control group students.
- **Had mixed results with respect to the number of credits earned.** After two program semesters, program group students had earned 8.4 total credits, whereas students in the control group had earned 5.7. However, excluding the non-degree applicable success course credits, students in the program and control groups earned around the same number of credits.

Unfortunately, extended follow-up on students in the Enhanced Opening Doors program found that the short-term positive effects did not translate into meaningful, long-term effects. Students in the program group maintained their edge in total credits earned, but this difference reflects mainly the credits from the success course, and the difference did not grow with additional post-program semesters. Four years after entering the Enhanced Opening Doors program, very few students earned college degrees.

Taken together, results from these two evaluations suggest that enhanced services for probationary students can yield some positive effects for students while they are enrolled, but that impacts depend on the implementation of the success course and the overall package of resources presented to students. In addition, more long-term support may be needed to help probationary students finish college successfully.

### **Factors Important for Success**

Several factors may have contributed to the relative success of the Enhanced Opening Doors program. While participation in the initial program was viewed by program group students as optional, program group members in Enhanced Opening Doors were told that enrollment in the success course was mandatory. This led to higher participation rates for program group members (72.3 percent as compared to 51.8 percent in the initial program).

In the initial program, the relationship of Chaffey’s Success Centers to the success course was unclear to many students and staff. In the Enhanced Opening Doors program, the role of the Success Centers was clarified, and success course instructors and Success Center faculty worked to develop more meaningful lessons linking students’ Success Center visits to the success course. Other changes were made to the second program as well: the program requirement to visit the Success Centers was reduced from 9 visits to 5 visits, the success course counselors were more experienced, and an optional second semester success course was added, though only a minority of students enrolled in it.

### **Factors that May Have Impeded the Programs**

Enrollment in success courses can present a degree of risk for students, in that students are spending time and effort on a course for which they may not earn degree-applicable credits. Success courses may also preclude students from taking other, degree-applicable courses. Students may decide that any potential benefits from a success course are outweighed by these costs.

### **Cost of the Enhanced Opening Doors Program**

The Enhanced Opening Doors program had a net cost of \$1300 per program group member over the course of the two program semesters. Excluding success course credits, the cost per credit earned for program group members (\$797 per credit) was higher than the cost for control group members (\$635 per credit).

### **Replicating the Strategy**

Enhanced services for probationary students may improve academic outcomes, but any potential benefits may depend on program design and implementation. The following guidelines may help institutions replicate this strategy successfully:

- **Utilize a success course as one element of a broader strategy.** Success courses may prove most effective when used as part of a set of multiple, varied interventions, including additional counseling and tutoring.
- **Ensure that students attend the success course.** The success of the second Chaffey program may have been due in part to a greater proportion of program group students seeing participation as mandatory and enrolling in the success course. Minimizing the opportunity cost of the success course (e.g. by reducing the credit-hours of the course) might increase the proportion of students who enroll.
- **Leverage existing student-support programs and facilities.** Chaffey's Success Centers played a critical role in both programs. Institutions that are able to leverage comparable tutoring programs or facilities of their own may have an easier time replicating the results of the Enhanced Opening Doors program.

**For more information,** please refer to the following MDRC publications:

Scrivener, Sue, Colleen Sommo and Herbert Collado. "Getting Back on Track: Effects of a Community College Program for Probationary Students." 2009. New York: MDRC.  
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/514/overview.html>.

Weiss, Michael, Thomas Brock, Colleen Sommo, Timothy Rudd and Mary Clair Turner. "Serving Community College Students on Probation: Four-Year Findings from Chaffey College's Opening Doors Program," 2011. New York: MDRC.  
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/610/overview.html>.

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