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Taking Courses as a Group Helps Community-College Freshmen Succeed, Study Finds

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Learning communities, linked courses that enroll a common group of students and are paired with enhanced services, increase the academic success of community-college students, according to a new report. Learning communities' effect on student retention, however, was less clear.

The study, conducted by the nonprofit research organization MDRC, tracked the progress of freshmen at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York, in Brooklyn, from 2003-5. Newly enrolling students were randomly assigned to a one-semester learning-community program or to a control group. Those in the learning communities were placed in groups of up to 25 and took three related courses: English (usually at the remedial level), a college-level academic course, and a one-credit orientation course. They also received special counseling, tutoring, and a voucher for textbooks.

The program at Kingsborough is part of the [Opening Doors](#) demonstration, which MDRC is using at six community colleges to test strategies for helping low-income students succeed. "The major take-away for me was something we believe: Learning communities do make a difference with students moving through developmental course work and getting academic credit," said Regina S. Peruggi, Kingsborough's president.

Students in learning communities were more likely than those in the control group to take and pass the English-assessment tests they needed to graduate or transfer to a four-year college, said the report, "A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College." Kingsborough's learning-community program emphasized English, and, as a result, more first-semester students at the college took developmental English.

Getting students through developmental classes quickly is important, Ms. Peruggi said. Students are "too often enmeshed in a web of developmental courses," she said, which can be discouraging and cause them to drop out.

Students in the program also took and passed more classes, and earned more credits during the first semester than the other students did. In addition, students in the learning community said they felt more connected to the college when they were surveyed one year after the program.

Less clear was the program's effect on student persistence in college. Retention for students in the program increased only during their third semester. The study showed that 53 percent of program students enrolled in at least one Kingsborough course during that semester, compared with 48 percent of the control group.

Researchers will continue to follow the students' progress for at least one more year, said Susan E. Scrivener, a senior associate at MDRC and the lead author of the study. Graduation rates of both groups will also be tracked. The authors note that they have found a pattern across the Opening Doors project: Effects are strongest when students are receiving special services, and diminish after the services end. Findings from the learning-communities study fit this pattern.

The study's authors suggest that a similar program lasting more than one semester might have a greater effect on student success, although the program was designed on the theory that improved early performance in college enhances performance throughout. It would also be difficult to continue the program beyond the first semester, when students specialize. Students must select a major after passing their first semester of classes in order to secure financial aid, Ms. Peruggi said.

The study's authors recognize that difficulty and suggest that, in the absence of continued learning communities, students could still receive services like counseling or financial support in subsequent semesters.

Another option, one that Kingsborough is exploring, is to have students make the transition into a second learning community, which would incorporate course work from their major, Ms. Peruggi said.

The report has led Kingsborough to plan to expand the learning-communities program, which now enrolls 65 percent of freshmen, to reach 80 percent of its freshmen by 2010. It has also sparked another study, which will explore the effects of learning communities at six community colleges, including Kingsborough's career-based program.