

A Whole 'Nother World

Students Navigating Community College

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Overview

Each year thousands of young people begin their college careers in community colleges. The lower cost, more convenient location, and flexible admissions standards of community colleges make them an attractive educational alternative for many students, especially those from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, persistence toward degrees among community college students is low. Family responsibilities, poor academic performance, and weak ties to faculty and other students get in the way of students' educational aspirations.

MDRC's Opening Doors Demonstration is measuring the effects of various combinations of curricular reforms, enhanced academic advising, and increased financial aid intended to increase the persistence and improve the academic achievement of students at six community colleges across the United States. To determine the impact of the Opening Doors interventions, the study uses a random assignment design. Students are assigned either to a program group that participates in special classes or receives Opening Doors services or to a comparison group that benefits only from the regular classes and services the college offers to all students.

This qualitative study, a complement to the Opening Doors impact evaluation, asked students about the factors that affect their ability to persist in community college. Interviews with a small sample of 47 students from both program and comparison groups, most between the ages of 18 and 25, were conducted at two Opening Doors campuses, Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, and Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. The program at Lorain provided enhanced advising services, while the program at Kingsborough used small learning communities to assist participating students. In the winter of 2005, students discussed their preparation for college, academic performance, family and work responsibilities, and connections to faculty, staff, and other students. The key findings are:

- Many younger students (20 and under) reported they attended college largely to please their parents and did not feel a strong personal motivation. In contrast, many students between 21 and 25 said they enrolled to escape low-wage work and ultimately provide a higher standard of living for their families.
- Parenting responsibilities of students with children often interfered with their ability to study and attend class using a traditional schedule.
- Making friends in college was only marginally important to interviewed students.
- At Lorain, the individualized academic advising the program group students received helped them avoid some pitfalls experienced by comparison group students, such as overloading their course schedules.
- At Kingsborough, program group students, who participated in classes with coordinated curricula, reported higher levels of personal attention on assignments from instructors than did comparison group students in traditional classes.

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Preface

Community colleges, which tend to be more accessible and affordable than other post-secondary institutions, are a critical educational resource for low-income people. Yet nearly half of community college students leave school before receiving a degree. Research by MDRC and others suggests that many community college students struggle with competing demands of work, family, and school, or with institutional barriers, such as poorly tailored instruction, insufficient financial aid, or inadequate advising. In 2003, MDRC launched the Opening Doors demonstration project to study the effects of innovative programs designed to help students stay in school and succeed. Six colleges in four states are taking part in the demonstration.

Two of the colleges in the demonstration are Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, and Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. The students in the program at Lorain received enhanced advising services, while those at Kingsborough participated in small learning communities. MDRC reported last year on the promising early results at Kingsborough. In this study, we tell the story behind the numbers. MDRC interviewed 47 students from both Lorain and Kingsborough who were part of either an Opening Doors program group or a comparison group. The students were asked about their experiences on and off campus and the factors that might help or hinder their academic progress.

The interviews confirmed that low-income community college students are not a homogenous group. The motivations for attending college and the level of maturity of students fresh out of high school and of older single parents are strikingly different. To be effective, interventions need to be designed to take these differences into account. It was encouraging that the program group students interviewed at both Lorain and Kingsborough expressed positive views of the benefits of Opening Doors. Students at Lorain said that individualized advising was helpful, and Kingsborough students studying in learning communities said they received more personal attention from professors on assignments. As our study continues, we will report whether these elements of the demonstration led to higher levels of achievement and retention in college among the students at Lorain, and whether the early signs of success were sustained at Kingsborough.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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The research team that conducted interviews at the two sites included the authors and Kate Gualtieri and Rogéair Purnell. At MDRC, Colleen Sommo and Jenny Au processed the quantitative data. Shirley James and her staff assisted with student recruitment. Margaret Bald edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The following advisors and reviewers from inside and outside MDRC responded to early findings and read and critiqued the report with care: members of the MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood, in particular, Connie Flanagan and Rick Settersten, as well as MDRC staff Robert Ivry, Thomas Brock, Dan Bloom, and Sue Scrivener. We particularly want to thank Bob Granger and the William T. Grant Foundation. Their ongoing, active support of the Opening Doors demonstration makes it possible for us to continue learning about ways to help improve the lives of community college students.

The Authors

Introduction

Why do so many community college students enroll in college and then seem to lose interest in school and end their studies? What interferes with community college students' quests for higher education? What might be done to help them navigate this "new world," encourage them to engage in their studies, and increase their success?

These questions are important for higher education policymakers and practitioners to answer, as nationally, nearly half of all students who begin at a community college drop out and fail to earn a degree from *any* higher education institution within a six-year period.¹ The reasons for these low rates of persistence are multifaceted. Some community college students are not sufficiently prepared or motivated to do college-level work — though research suggests that most entering community college students desire a college degree.² In some instances, students are overwhelmed by competing responsibilities at work or at home, especially if they have children.³ It is also possible that community colleges — strapped with limited resources — may not do enough to provide the academic and social support students need to reach their educational and personal goals.

MDRC launched a demonstration project called Opening Doors to measure the effects of programs designed to increase persistence and improve academic and other outcomes among community college students. Six community colleges across the United States are participating in the project and have implemented various combinations of curricular reforms, enhanced academic advising, and increased financial aid. Since 2003, MDRC and its research partners have been documenting the implementation and short- and long-term effects of these programs.⁴ Preliminary results have already been published for three community colleges in Opening Doors,⁵ and additional reports are planned from 2006 through 2010.

The methodology used to measure Opening Doors program impacts is unusually rigorous. At each college, students were randomly assigned to one of two groups: a program group that participates in special classes or receives other enhanced services, or a comparison group that receives the regular classes and services the college offers to all students. This random as-

¹U.S. Department of Education (2002).

²U.S. Department of Education (2003).

³Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002).

⁴For a complete description of the Opening Doors study and a listing of research partners, see Brock and LeBlanc (2005).

⁵Early impacts for Kingsborough Community College are reported in Bloom and Sommo (2005). Findings from the Opening Doors program at Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson are reported in Brock and Richburg-Hayes (2006). Early impact results for Lorain County Community College will be released in 2006.

signment process ensures that students in both groups have similar personal characteristics and motivation levels at the beginning of the study. MDRC and its research partners are using surveys and administrative records (including college transcripts) to track both groups of students over time and will compare the groups' outcomes to determine whether students in the Opening Doors program show greater persistence in college and experience better academic outcomes. The study will also examine effects of the programs on nonacademic outcomes, including employment, social support networks, civic participation, and health-related attitudes and behavior. The impact sample is quite large: Across the six colleges, almost 5,800 students have been randomly assigned, divided evenly between program and comparison groups.

This report is intended as a companion to the impact study. It uses qualitative research methods to dig deeper into the personal and academic lives of a small subset of Opening Doors sample members at two of the participating colleges: Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, and Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio (near Cleveland). The authors conducted a total of 47 intensive, one-on-one interviews to learn about students' experiences on and off campus and the factors that seem to help or hinder their progress in school. The interviews focused on the following questions:

- What reasons do students give for being in college?
- What are students' lives like?
- What supports and challenges do students experience in and out of college that affect their engagement?
- How do students' relationships with faculty, staff, or other students affect their engagement?
- How do students in the program group use the Opening Doors academic and advising services? Do they find them helpful?
- Do students *not* in Opening Doors access similar supports?

For this study, MDRC interviewed students from both the program and the comparison groups at each school. Obviously, a 47-student sample is insufficient to measure program impacts, and this was not the intent. The authors did, however, hope to uncover issues or themes that might shed light on the impact findings when they become available for the full sample. For example, if Opening Doors were effective, it is hypothesized that students in the program group might talk about their experiences in a way that suggested they found greater support on campus or were more engaged in their studies than students in the comparison group. At the same time, the authors were open to the possibility that students in the comparison group may have found

other programs or people to help them accomplish their goals. If this were true, then Opening Doors might not be expected to have much of an effect on persistence or other outcomes.

The report is organized as follows: The first section briefly reviews the findings of other studies of student engagement and persistence in community college. The second section describes the two community colleges and the sample of students profiled in the report. The third section presents the findings from the qualitative interviews. It concludes with a summary and a discussion of the implications of the findings for community colleges and the Opening Doors impact evaluation.

Community Colleges: Student Persistence and Departure

Researchers have been working for some time to understand the factors that lead community college students to stay in or leave school. Much of the early research focused on the background and personal characteristics of students and their families, such as gender, race/ethnicity, high school performance, the timing of college entrance, parental education, and family income. For example, Gates and Creamer used the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972 to examine student retention in community colleges, and built a predictive model that focused on students' backgrounds and personal characteristics — such as high school grades and the decision to delay college entry — as explanatory factors. That model explained just 4.3 percent of the observed variation in community college retention,⁶ highlighting the need for broader theoretical frameworks for understanding student persistence in and completion of community college.

After undertaking a comprehensive literature review, Tinto developed a theory that shifted the focus from students' background characteristics to their experiences after arriving on campus.⁷ He argued that students are more likely to stay in school and perform well when they feel fully integrated into the college experience, both socially and academically. Such integration occurs when students have regular, meaningful interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students, both in the classroom and in less formal settings. Braxton and other scholars have reassessed Tinto's theory and attempted to delve deeper into the processes through which student commitment to completing higher education increases via integration into the academic and social communities of the college or university.⁸ These efforts place greater emphasis on cultural and organizational explanations for student persistence and success.

⁶Gates and Creamer (1984).

⁷Tinto (1993).

⁸Braxton (2002).

A number of studies have attempted to measure concepts of integration, interaction, and organizational support for students on community college campuses in order to explain persistence and other educational outcomes. For example, Pascarella and colleagues tracked 825 community college students for nine years and concluded that “student-environment fit” — which is partly attributable to the frequency and quality of students’ interactions with faculty and peers — was the most important determinant of persistence and degree completion.⁹ Similarly, in a study of 569 students enrolled in the Ford Foundation’s Urban Community Colleges Transfer Opportunities Program, Nora and Rendon found that students who were better integrated into the academic and social life of a community college campus were more likely to transfer to four-year institutions.¹⁰ The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) uses student engagement as a yardstick for assessing whether, and to what extent, an institution’s educational practices are likely to produce greater persistence and other positive outcomes for its students. Among the practices that the CCSSE suggests lead to higher engagement are opportunities for collaborative learning (such as asking students to work on assignments with other students in class), frequent student-faculty interactions, and the availability of supports for learners (such as academic advising and tutoring).¹¹

The Opening Doors Demonstration is rooted in the same body of research. The community colleges taking part in the study have each developed programs that they believe will offer students more personalized attention and provide enhanced academic and social experiences. The next sections describe the Opening Doors programs at two of these colleges — Lorain County Community College and Kingsborough Community College — and how they differed from what students in the comparison groups received.

These two campuses were chosen because their program models aimed at integrating students into college in two different ways, as described in detail below. Additionally both interventions started early enough in the Opening Doors study to allow interviews to be conducted in early 2005, after the program semesters were completed for most students who were interviewed.¹² Both campuses had adequate populations of students between the ages of 17 and 25, the group of interest to MDRC and the William T. Grant Foundation, a primary funder of this qualitative study.

⁹Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington (1986).

¹⁰Nora and Rendon (1990).

¹¹Community College Leadership Program (2005).

¹²Owens Community College in Ohio ran an Opening Doors intervention that was similar to that at Lorain County Community College but began a year later. The Opening Doors program at Chaffey College in California has curricular reforms that would also have been interesting to consider for this study; however that program also began too late to be included.

Lorain County Community College: The Enhanced Advising Services Model

Lorain County Community College is located in Elyria, Ohio, a mid-sized city of 56,000 about 25 miles west of Cleveland. The sprawling campus serves about 10,000 students. It is easily accessible by car from the primary residential areas of the city, and most students drive. The commute via public transportation takes longer and has limited service. Overall, two-thirds of the college's student body attend part time, and the majority (two-thirds) are women. The student body is predominantly white (non-Hispanic), and nearly half the students are over 25.

For the Opening Doors demonstration, Lorain tested a program that offered students enhanced advising services and a modest scholarship. The program began in fall 2003 and ended in May 2006. Lorain's Opening Doors program served full-time and part-time freshmen and continuing students with fewer than 13 credits completed. All students reported income below 250 percent of the federal poverty level on their financial aid applications. The linchpin of Lorain's Opening Doors program was an adviser with whom students were expected to meet at least once a month for two semesters to discuss academic progress and resolve any issues that might be affecting their schooling. Additionally, students received customized career counseling to help in their progress along a career path and in finding employment (while in school) related to their career goals. The adviser was expected to carry a caseload of no more than 150 students. The adviser was also expected to work closely with staff in other departments, such as financial aid and career services, to see that students got services they needed or requested.

The Opening Doors scholarship at Lorain consisted of a \$150 payment for each of two semesters that students could use for any purpose. The scholarship payments were approved by the Opening Doors adviser and were paid in two installments: \$100 after a required advising session at the beginning of the semester, and \$50 after another required session in mid-semester. This payment structure was intended to encourage students in Opening Doors to follow through on their advising appointments and to build a relationship with their Opening Doors adviser.

Students in the comparison group at Lorain received neither enhanced advising services nor an Opening Doors scholarship. Rather, comparison group students met with the college's regular counseling and advising staff on an "as needed" basis and as appointments became available. At Lorain, *academic advisers* are generalists who work with newer students to assist them with scheduling, financial aid, and course placement. *Counselors* are available to work with students who need help determining their career direction and those who are further along in fulfilling their degree requirements. Because counselors tend to be program-specific and are therefore more aware of particular degree and transfer requirements, they can work with "undecided" students with more depth than advisers. Similar to other community colleges around the

country, the student-to-counselor ratio at Lorain is about 1,000 to 1,¹³ suggesting that most counseling appointments are short and infrequent. The regular counseling and advising staff are not expected to follow up with staff in other college departments to make sure that students get services after they receive referrals.

Kingsborough Community College: The Learning Communities Model

Kingsborough Community College, located on the southern tip of Brooklyn, is part of the City University of New York system. Like the borough in which it is located, Kingsborough's student body is extremely diverse: In 2005 it was 41 percent white (non-Hispanic), 33 percent black (non-Hispanic), 14 percent Hispanic, and 12 percent Asian or Pacific Islander. Many of the students in all of these racial and ethnic categories are recent immigrants. The student population is young — three out of four students are under 25 — and a little more than half of the student body attends full time. The campus is in a remote location, even for most Brooklyn residents, and most of its 30,000 students have a long commute (often more than an hour) via subway and bus.

The Opening Doors demonstration at Kingsborough, which ran between fall 2003 and summer 2005, tested a learning communities program. Learning communities have been defined as “any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses — or actually restructure the material entirely — so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.”¹⁴ A common form is to pair or cluster two or more individually taught courses around a common theme and to organize students' schedules so that the same group of students takes the same courses together.

At Kingsborough, the Opening Doors Learning Communities program targeted freshmen enrolled full time. The learning communities consisted of three classes that groups of approximately 25 students took together as a block during their first semester. The classes included (1) a college orientation course, taught by a counselor, which covered college policies, study skills, time management, and other topics; (2) an English course, most often at the developmental level; and (3) a standard college course such as sociology, history, or health. The instructors for each block were expected to coordinate their syllabi before the semester began and to meet regularly during the semester to discuss student progress. The instructors who taught the orientation courses were expected to be proactive in their counseling of the students. For exam-

¹³Grubb (2001).

¹⁴Gabelnick et al. (1990).

ple, these counselors were supposed to have at least one individual meeting with each student during the semester, in addition to class time. The Opening Doors Learning Communities program counselors also had much smaller caseloads than regular Kingsborough counselors. In addition to this enhanced counseling element, students had access to a dedicated tutor who could assist them with English and other course assignments. Students in the Opening Doors Learning Communities program also received vouchers that covered the cost of books or supplies at the campus bookstore.

Students in the comparison group at Kingsborough were not assigned to learning communities and did not take intentionally linked classes. Rather, these students took the courses that were normally available to freshmen, and they were likely to encounter different students in every class. Comparison group students could take the college orientation class and an English course if they wished, but they were not required to do so during this semester. Students who were not assigned to the Opening Doors Learning Communities program did not have a dedicated counselor, although they could access counseling on their own initiative. Comparison group students could also get tutoring through the college's tutoring labs, but they did not have a tutor assigned to their classes.¹⁵ Finally, comparison group students did not receive book vouchers.

The Opening Doors Qualitative Study: Research Sample and Methods

This in-depth, qualitative study began by selecting a random sample of 100 students from Kingsborough and 88 students from Lorain who were enrolled in the Opening Doors impact evaluation. Because a funder of the study was primarily interested in the experiences of young students, only those between the ages of 17 and 25 were included. The sample was evenly divided between students in the Opening Doors program groups and students in the comparison groups. MDRC sent letters and called the students to ask whether they would take part in an in-depth qualitative interview, and offered a \$40 gift card as an incentive. Some students were difficult to reach, and some were not interested in being interviewed. Interviews were conducted with 10 program group students and 10 comparison group students from each campus. Inadvertently, one additional program group student was added from Lorain, resulting in a total of 41 interviews.

In addition to the random sample, program staff at Kingsborough and Lorain identified several students who were particularly active in Opening Doors. This oversampling of the program group was intended to ensure that the study captured the experiences of at least some students who had received the full “dose” of the treatment. Three supplementary interviews from

¹⁵Tutors were assigned to all developmental courses. Bloom and Sommo (2005), p. 21.

Kingsborough and three from Lorain were conducted. The addition of these students to the Opening Doors Qualitative Study brought the total sample to 47.¹⁶

All of the students who were interviewed at Kingsborough were enrolled in the Opening Doors study and began taking classes in fall 2004. At Lorain, the students who were interviewed were enrolled in the Opening Doors study in spring 2004. In all cases, the interviews were conducted approximately two or three months after students assigned to the program group would have completed their involvement with Opening Doors: February 2005 at Lorain and March 2005 at Kingsborough. All of the Kingsborough students in the sample were still enrolled there at the time of the interview. A few Lorain students had dropped out or had transferred.

Most of the interviews were conducted in person and lasted about an hour. All of the interviews were tape recorded. Interviewers followed the same guide and covered topics such as students' decisions to go to college, a typical school day, their major course of study and their career aspirations, their study habits and grades, their experiences in Opening Doors and with other campus-based support services, and their academic and financial circumstances and challenges. Generally, students were open and willing to discuss their experiences and decisions and the challenges they faced in college. From each tape-recorded interview, field notes were developed that both summarized students' answers to the questions and incorporated pertinent or revealing quotes from those answers; the field notes formed the basis of the analysis for this report. In addition, MDRC had access to each student's Baseline Information Form (BIF), which provided the students' self-reported personal characteristics and academic goals at the time they enrolled in the Opening Doors study.

Interview Sample Characteristics

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the program and the comparison group students who were interviewed at each college. The data were drawn from a brief questionnaire students completed just before they were randomly assigned. About three-quarters of the students interviewed at both schools were women. Most of the Lorain students were between the ages of 21 and 25, while most of the Kingsborough students were younger, ages 17 to 20.¹⁷ On average, the students who were interviewed at Lorain were about three years older than the Kingsborough students.

More than half of the students who were interviewed at Lorain were white (non-Hispanic), while at Kingsborough, almost two-thirds of those interviewed were black (non-

¹⁶The supplementary interviews from Lorain included three students who were over 25.

¹⁷The fact that the Kingsborough students were younger can be attributed mainly to the Opening Doors eligibility criteria at that campus, which specified that students be first-time freshmen who attended school full time during the day. Bloom and Sommo (2005), p. 25.

Opening Doors Qualitative Study

Table 1

**Characteristics of Interviewed Students at the Time of
Random Assignment to the Opening Doors Demonstration, by Campus**

	Lorain Group	Kingsborough Group
Gender (%)		
Male	25.0	22.7
Female	75.0	77.3
Age (%)		
17-20 years old	25.0	82.6
21-25 years old	62.5	17.4
26-30 years old	8.3	0.0
31-34 years old	4.2	0.0
Average age (years)	22.6	19.2
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
Hispanic	12.5	10.5
Black	25.0	63.2
White	54.2	15.8
Asian or Pacific Islander	0.0	5.3
Other (American Indian/Alaskan Native or Other)	8.3	5.3
Number of children (%)		
None	29.2	100.0
1	41.7	0.0
2	16.7	0.0
3 or more	12.5	0.0
Household receiving any of the following benefits (%):		
Unemployment/Dislocated Worker Benefits	4.2	0.0
Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Disability	20.8	0.0
Cash assistance or welfare (TANF)	20.8	0.0
Food stamps	33.3	4.3
None of the above	45.8	95.7
Live in public or Section 8 housing (%)	25.0	9.5
Financially dependent on parents (%)	20.8	87.0
Currently employed ^a (%)	58.3	47.8
<i>Among those currently employed^b:</i>		
<i>Number of hours worked per week in current job (%)</i>		
1-10 hours	0.0	9.1
11-20 hours	35.7	18.2
21-30 hours	42.9	45.5
31-40 hours	7.1	27.3
More than 40 hours	14.3	0.0

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	Lorain Group	Kingsborough Group
Diplomas/degrees earned (%)		
High school diploma	83.3	87.0
General Education Development (GED) certificate	16.7	13.0
Occupational/technical certificate	8.3	0.0
Date of high school graduation/GED receipt (%)		
During the past year	37.5	59.1
Between 1 and 5 years ago	25.0	36.4
Between 5 and 10 years ago	33.3	4.5
More than 10 years ago	4.2	0.0
Completed any college courses/credits (%)	45.8	8.7
First person in family to attend college (%)	16.7	26.1
U.S. citizen (%)	100.0	69.6
Sample size	24	23

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Baseline Information Form (BIF) data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table are presented only for the 47 students interviewed at both campuses.

Calculations for Lorain used all available data for the 24 sample members who completed a BIF and were randomly assigned between 10/06/2003 and 03/19/2004.

Calculations for Kingsborough used all available data for the 23 sample members who completed a BIF and were randomly assigned between 07/01/2004 and 09/15/2004.

Missing values are not included in individual variable distributions.

Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Characteristics shown in italics are calculated for a proportion of the full sample.

^aThis data is drawn from the Baseline Information Forms filled out by students at the time they entered the study; thus it does not reflect their work levels during the program semester.

^bThese calculations are presented only for respondents who reported earning an hourly wage.

Hispanic). The Kingsborough group was more racially and ethnically diverse than the Lorain group. Approximately one-third of the Kingsborough students were not U.S. citizens, while nearly all Lorain students who were interviewed were citizens.

The Lorain students had more family responsibilities and were more often balancing work, family, and education. More than 70 percent of the Lorain students who were interviewed

were parents of one or more children. This contrasts sharply with the Kingsborough students, none of whom were parents, according to the data provided on Baseline Information Forms.¹⁸ The majority of Lorain students lived in families that had relied on some form of government assistance programs, such as disability income, cash assistance, food stamps, or housing subsidies, while only one of the Kingsborough students who was interviewed lived in a household that had received public supports.

At the time students entered the Opening Doors study, those at Lorain were much less likely to be financially dependent on their parents, compared with the Kingsborough students. A larger proportion of the Lorain students were employed at the time they entered the study. Among those who were employed, the Lorain students also worked more hours each week than did the Kingsborough students.¹⁹ Fourteen percent of the Lorain students worked more than 40 hours a week, while none of the Kingsborough students were working that many hours. In part, this may be an artifact of the programs' designs. Opening Doors at Lorain was open to part-time students taking classes in the evening, while Opening Doors at Kingsborough was open only to full-time students attending classes during the day.

The educational backgrounds of the students who were interviewed at both campuses were similar. More than 80 percent at each campus had received a high school diploma or a General Education Development (GED) certificate. A few of the Lorain students also had earned occupational or technical certificates. However, the time gap between finishing high school and enrolling in community college was significantly larger for the Lorain students. More than 95 percent of the Kingsborough students had enrolled in community college within five years of graduating from high school, while slightly less than two-thirds of the Lorain students had enrolled within five years of graduating or receiving a GED. Again, program design may be driving this difference, since Kingsborough targeted incoming freshmen. This gap between high school and college was reflected in the higher average age of the Lorain student body. In addition to longer education gaps and more extensive work histories, almost half of the Lorain students who were interviewed had earned college credits at some point in the past, compared with fewer than 10 percent of the Kingsborough students.

Interview Findings: What the Students Had To Say

This section reports on findings from the interviews with the 47 students in the Opening Doors Qualitative Study. Although the study examined outcomes for the program and compari-

¹⁸An interview revealed that one student in the sample was the father of a 7-year-old child, although his Baseline Information Form data did not reveal this.

¹⁹These data are drawn from the Baseline Information Forms filled out by students at the time they entered the study; thus the data do not reflect their work levels during the program semester.

son group members on each campus and looked for differences, the answers to questions posed in the interviews could not be easily quantified, and the sample was not large enough to test whether differences were statistically significant. Therefore, this discussion emphasizes major themes across the two research groups and points out program or comparison group differences only when they seemed to be particularly striking, or when necessary for placing a quotation or finding in context (for example, when a program group member mentioned a service available only through Opening Doors). The first section chronicles the characteristics and daily lives of the students, followed by three sections that examine outcomes related to the three program areas: advising, academics, and finances or stipends.

Typical Daily Life and Social Life Experiences of Students

Lorain County Community College

The students at Lorain who were interviewed for this study were largely similar across research groups (program and comparison groups) in terms of both their typical school day and general social life experiences. Of the 24 students who were interviewed at Lorain, 18 were women. Fifteen of these women were over 21. Fourteen of the 18 women were parents, and eight of these parents lived on their own. Only two of the six men who were interviewed were parents. Because the women at Lorain were in the majority and seemed to drive much of the story, they were considered to be the representative Opening Doors students there.

These female students began their days early, between 5:30 and 7:00 a.m. The first order of business was to get their children fed, dressed, and out the door to day care or school — usually before 8:30 a.m. These activities were usually the sole responsibility of the mothers, most of whom were single at the time of the interview. Most of the women relied on day care centers, while a few others received help from family members.

After sending their children off to day care or school and getting themselves ready, the mothers set off for either work or school, depending on their schedules. Many students attended school part time while working full time. Others did the reverse. These students worked in factories, for telemarketing firms, in retail, and in fast food. Only one student in the sample relied on public assistance while attending school. Many of the part-time students worked a day or two during the week and filled out their full-time work schedules on the weekends.

The students were typically not tied to a traditional day-student schedule. Many took classes in the afternoon and the evenings, while others took courses via cable TV or the Internet. Cable and Internet classes appeared to be popular with the working, single mothers who needed the added flexibility of “attending” class when convenient and working at their own pace. When tied to a regular day schedule, in combination with work, these women often found themselves

in a bind, as one young mother explained: “Basically, I was not seeing my kids for four days. So instead of not seeing them, I prefer to do [the classes] online. That way I could see [my children]. It’s better.”

After the work and school day ended, the students focused on their households and families. They cooked their evening meals, cleaned their homes, played with their children, bathed them, helped them with their homework, and finally put them to bed. Only when these tasks were done could the students spend an hour or two studying or taking care of personal tasks — if they were able to stay awake.

SOCIAL LIFE

Students at Lorain in this sample had little time for socializing. In their comments on their social lives on and off campus, there were no substantial differences between the program and the comparison group students. The majority of students in both groups described themselves as largely antisocial. Friendships seemed to be casualties of family, work, and school responsibilities. The demands of “real life” limited their time with friends, even among those who described their earlier years as filled with friends, boyfriends, and socializing. These students now mostly relied on their families rather than friends for social activities, and put family time first.

They also placed academics before friendship. Although a few students in the program group expressed a vague desire to meet other Opening Doors students, in general they were not particularly interested in making friends at school. This had not always been the case, however. In their lives before college, work, and children, the students often noted that they had placed friendship before school, choosing to “party” and hang out with friends instead of going to school. However, with age and the assumption of more adult roles, they had put those days behind them.

Those who did make an effort to establish some social life at school were careful about who they invested their time in, as their time was precious.

I really didn’t make too many great friends, because...it’s harder for me to get to know everybody and really focus on what I’m really here for, so I try to keep myself more focused on school than to make friends.

They made friends with people who served some material purpose, usually related to class work, as this student suggested:

Even though I do like to make friends and try to meet people, especially for classes if I need that back up, I’ll try to get a couple of people’s numbers out of class, just like, “Do we have a test today?” or “What did I miss?” So I try to keep a couple of friends in each class.

The friendships the students described seemed to be at an acquaintance level. The few students who had made closer friends reported that they were most often students similar to themselves — working parents with serious goals, “Everyone’s here for the right reason, everybody’s here to get an education, nobody’s here to goof off.”

Students also consistently reported that they were not involved in social or extracurricular activities on campus. Even those who expressed some interest in these activities simply did not have the time to participate. Despite these “weak ties,” which some have argued are one reason for higher dropout rates in community colleges²⁰ and which programs such as Opening Doors are designed to bolster, most of the students did feel that they “fit in” on campus, another important factor in keeping students connected and enrolled.²¹

Kingsborough Community College

As noted above, the majority of the Kingsborough students who were interviewed for the study were young (aged 18-20) single women without children, many of whom lived at home with their parents. As with Lorain students, there were few differences in the typical school days of the program and comparison groups.

These students started their school days between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. Unlike the students at Lorain, these students were typically responsible only for getting themselves ready in the mornings. Most found no particular part of their day very difficult. The few who did mentioned the need to wake up early and make long commutes. The average commuting time to Kingsborough among the students who were interviewed was an hour and a half, on a combination of transport, often involving more than one subway train and multiple buses. If one of these buses or trains were behind schedule, the student would be late, and as one student explained: “The commute is annoying because [of] the fact that no one likes to rush, and sometimes the bus just won’t come, or something like that. It just ends up making me late...it’s kind of frustrating.”

They typically took classes through the early afternoon — a full-time schedule. After classes, most left for part-time jobs, usually in retail, child care, or on campus. Then they returned home to study. The majority reported no family obligations, and none had child care responsibilities. They were able to study at home without interruption, reporting that nothing got in the way of their studying. Most of the students found the amount of schoolwork and their course loads reasonable and said that they were getting good grades. Most mentioned that in the future they hoped to earn a college degree, and many had plans to transfer to four-year schools.

²⁰Tinto (1993).

²¹Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington (1986).

SOCIAL LIFE

Across research groups, no differences were observed in how students described their typical days. Students' social lives were not much different either, especially after the research semesters were over. However, most students in the program group said they would recommend Opening Doors to others, in part for social reasons, as one young male student explained:

Yeah, definitely. It helps you make friends. It helps you stay focused in school. It doesn't feel like you have different classes. It's like it's all one class but different subjects. You can study easier. Use what you learned here [points to another place] here. It's like a web. It's all connected. I like it. I wish it could go with me throughout the time in Kingsborough. That would be real cool. Stay with the same people. It's fun.

Other program group students formed study groups with the classmates in their linked classes, which they also found helpful. Almost all enjoyed taking classes together with the same students and helping one another learn. As reported by those interviewed, most of the relationships that formed were temporary, not the lasting friendships that continued into the next semester as hoped for by the program's designers. Most of the comparison group students described their friendships functionally, as one student explained:

I make friends with people in my class, [and] if I'm absent and I need something, they're there. But I have an outside life. I don't call them every day.

Although many program and comparison group students said they "fit in" at Kingsborough, when they discussed their friends they referred mainly to individuals from their neighborhood or outside college. Likewise, those who mentioned significant others usually referred to people who were not fellow Kingsborough students.

Orientation, Advising, and Support

Lorain County Community College

As noted, advising was the primary program element available to Opening Doors participants at Lorain County Community College. As part of the enhanced advising services, program group students were offered supplemental assistance designed to address the guidance-related needs of low-income students entering college or still near the beginning of their college careers. The comparison group, in contrast, received only the standard counseling services offered at the school, and counselors and academic advisers at Lorain often had caseloads of 1,000 or more. Academic advisers at Lorain are generalists who work with newer students to assist them with scheduling, financial aid, and course placement. Counselors are available to

work with students who need help determining their career direction or who are further along in fulfilling their degree requirements. Counselors tend to be program-specific, and therefore are more aware of specific degree and transfer requirements and are available to work with the “undecided” students with more depth than advisers. Opening Doors advisers, in contrast, carried small caseloads of, at most, 150 students.

Across program groups, the students at Lorain were clear, by and large, about why they wanted to be in college: to escape low-wage work and improve their standard of living. As one student put it, “I am not going to be doing this fast food all my life.” They also often mentioned particular motivations, such as specific career goals or the desire to be good role models for their children. On occasion, they enrolled to prove someone wrong, as one student said: “Not too many people [in my family] thought I would go through with [going to college] I guess, even though I was the only one to graduate from high school, too.”

Once they decided to go to college, some students were starting from scratch in determining their academic goals and what they wanted from college, as this somewhat older blue-collar father revealed: “I’m *illiterate* as far as college; I just always wanted to come back to school.” This same student highlighted how basic the guidance he needed might be: “I didn’t know what (I was in college) for. Even now I don’t know what I want to take up.” Although students were usually able to state in their interviews why they had come to college, many were uncertain about exactly how to achieve their academic goals. “People don’t realize this is a whole ‘nother world...the campus of a college,” one student said. “If you come in here not knowing what’s going on, and you don’t ask for help, you’ll be lost and you will try your best to try to get back out there [to the outside world].” Most students who were interviewed for this study lacked personal resources, such as family members or friends who had graduated from or even attended college. They needed advice about meeting the demands and expectations of college, setting academic goals, and planning a route to reach them.

All Lorain students pursuing an associate’s degree are required to take a one-unit college orientation course, Student Development 101 (SD 101), described in the course catalogue as “an introductory course designed to promote students’ academic, social, and career skills, leading to their holistic development and the encouragement of life-long learning.” Comparison group students who were interviewed were more likely than program group students to believe that this college orientation course was useful. They appreciated the opportunity to meet other students and become familiar with available campus resources or supports.

More of the comparison group students who were interviewed used campus-wide advising services (provided by academic advisers and counselors). At Lorain the responsibilities of academic advisers and counselors are separate; those duties were combined in Opening Doors. Academic advisers help students select an appropriate major, while counselors help stu-

dents decide on goals or tailor their course of study for ease of transfer. However, most students who were interviewed in the comparison group reported that they had never used advising or counseling services. Students who had used services generally sought help with class schedules, planning the sequence of their major courses, and with other problems, such as balancing parenting and education responsibilities. They reported generally positive interactions with staff, although some did note that they felt rushed during advising appointments. Some others said that the wait times for services were long and/or that the intensity of interaction or perceived interest of counselors seemed low. More comparison group students also used supplementary services, such as Women's Link, than did program group students, who were able to get most of the assistance they needed from Opening Doors.²²

Program group students rated their counseling experience highly. They interacted more often and more intensively with advisers than did comparison group students. Program participants had easy access to Opening Doors counselors. Most could drop in without an appointment. As one student who had been out of high school for a few years at the time of the interview described: "I feel like if I had the kind of help they've [Opening Doors] given me when I tried to start right after high school, I might have already completed my degree. Maybe I just needed the counseling that I didn't know where to get." Others were able to call or e-mail questions, and all received quick responses. Opening Doors program group students also got information about special assistance that was less widely known among the general student body, as one student explained: "I wasn't aware that there was financial aid available to me. They were supportive on helping me schedule my classes and things I wasn't aware about."

Although most advising addressed academic issues, such as class sequence or transfer requirements, students also used these services to address personal issues that interfered with their school performance. This access and depth of support may indeed be a factor contributing to any future retention differences observed between the two groups. One program group student described the advising support she received as a "lifeline":

I was in the hospital last semester. I had a severe asthma attack. I got put in ICU. [My Opening Doors adviser] went to all of my instructors and....he just went over the top. If I hadn't been in this program I might have had to drop out. And then I ended up with a 3.0 GPA. I got all B's in all of my classes, so...I really felt appreciation for him.

In instances of personal crises, Opening Doors staff were often able to help students navigate the school's bureaucracy. As is often the case with young people when problems arise,

²²Women's Link provides information and referrals regarding campus and community resources, one-on-one support for personal and/or academic difficulties, and crisis intervention to both men and women. It also offers special programs that address students' personal, educational, and career concerns.

students sometimes waited too long to ask for help. This was most apparent among those forced by personal circumstances to withdraw from school. These students often dropped out to weather a personal crisis, seeking out Opening Doors staff only after the crisis had passed, and they needed help reenrolling. The Opening Doors staff guided students to the correct administrative offices, helped them draft letters to oversight bodies, and generally smoothed their way through the administrative requirements.

Although Opening Doors counselors helped many students, some believed that the personal challenges they faced were not appropriate to bring to the staff. As one student said, “I don’t think they would have been able to help me in my situation, unless they wanted to babysit.” Generally, however, Opening Doors students appreciated the support available from Opening Doors counselors. As one student put it, “It’s nice to know I have that help when I need it. They look out for my well-being.”

In contrast, the comparison group students who were interviewed primarily faced issues of academic balance, ranging from a fear of returning to school to the challenge of combining parenting with academics. If they did face problems as severe as those reported by program group students, it is unclear to whom they could have turned for assistance comparable to that received by program group students.

Kingsborough Community College

The students who were interviewed at Kingsborough were less certain than those at Lorain of their reasons for attending college, and few had set a specific academic goal. The Kingsborough students were younger, more likely to be entering college directly from high school, less likely to have significant work experience, and less likely than Lorain students in the sample to be parents or to have significant responsibilities aside from school. Their relative youth and lack of family obligations may have partially accounted for their lack of clear purpose.

If I won the lottery I wouldn’t go, but the chances of that happening are very slim so I guess I will just have to go to college.

The strongest reasons these students gave for attending community college were their parents’ encouragement (“You do what I couldn’t do”) or coercion (“Go to college or get out of the house”). As one young son of immigrant parents said: “I’m basically living the dream for [my father]. I didn’t really want to go to college because I didn’t really like schoolwork. I don’t like school. But I’m doing it; it’s not my choice. If it was up to me I wouldn’t have come.”

The Kingsborough students who were interviewed were slightly more likely than Lorain students to be from homes in which at least one person had attended college, or to have

friends who were attending college, offering them experiences to draw upon as they charted a course through college. Students did get advice from their friends and family.

These same students, however, reported little, if any, push from high school teachers or counselors to attend college. With few exceptions, the high schools they attended were not focused on college preparation. Most of these young people described their high schools as chaotic “holding pens” dominated by social cliques (to which they either belonged or tried to escape). Nevertheless, several said that they looked forward to college despite receiving very little encouragement from their high schools.

Perhaps because of this lack of preparation in high school or their younger age and fewer pressing issues, most students who were interviewed at Kingsborough were also vague about their future plans, beyond getting a degree in order to have a “good job.”

I want to become someone. I want to be sitting down in an office with air conditioning. Not standing up in a factory like my mother....

Many Kingsborough students mentioned a wide variety of career interests they were beginning to explore.

My last year of high school I really got into my biology classes, my science classes, as far as delivering babies and stuff like that...And really everything, diseases and how they come about...so I decided that I wanted to go to college and study more about that stuff, and maybe I could become an obstetrician.

In short, for most of the Kingsborough students who were interviewed, going to college was their next logical step, but they were overall less focused than the Lorain students on academic and career goals. According to the school’s Web site, counseling and advising services are abundant at Kingsborough. Counseling services, orientation classes, and special population services are among the resources available to all Kingsborough students.²³ Like Lorain, Kingsborough offers a student development course, SD 10, a one-unit elective available to all freshmen. It facilitates interactive learning for students and provides information and skills important for the transition to college and success once there. It covers such topics as academic policies, career exploration, human relations, learning styles, and library skills. SD 10 was also integrated into the Opening Doors Learning Communities program as a mandatory course. The Opening Doors version, however, differed from the course taken by the general student body and the comparison group students, in that the counselor collaborated with an English professor and a “content course” professor (instructor for an academic course such as psychology, health, or speech) to meet the

²³Other support services for students include: peer advisers, the Office of Student Affairs, the freshman year experience, advanced student counseling, and the Kingsborough retention program.

academic and counseling needs of the students. The Opening Doors counselor was also much more likely than regular counselors to meet individually with students weekly.

When asked about their experience with college orientation programs or courses, program group students, who had taken SD 10 as part of their learning community curriculum, reported that the experience was quite useful. Many spoke highly of the counselor who taught the class. For example, some students mentioned that their SD 10 counselors helped them learn study skills, put together sensible schedules, and better manage their time. They reported that their counselors were also available to discuss any problems they had, and in fact counselors would approach them as problems in the classroom arose. Students primarily received advising on academic issues, such as their choice of a major or scheduling for future semesters. Even after the research semester, some students continued to seek assistance from their SD 10 counselors. “I just can’t get over her,” said one young female student.

Few of the comparison group students mentioned any orientation services.²⁴ A few reported receiving advice from either a traditional or peer counselor to address a particular issue. In general, those in the comparison group were able to get help solving their problems fairly readily. However, the program group students seemed to have a small advantage in this area because of the closeness of their relationships with the SD 10 counselors.

When asked to describe the biggest challenge they had faced thus far in school, most of the Kingsborough students in both the program and the comparison groups said they had not yet faced any significant challenges — in sharp contrast to the Lorain sample. Some mentioned difficulties with assignments or failing parts of the required college entrance exams. But they expressed little trepidation about navigating the college environment, and most appeared confident in their ability to do so.

Academics: Classes, Tutoring, Studying, and Performance

Lorain County Community College

The primary thrust of the Opening Doors demonstration at Lorain was enhanced advising services to help students achieve their academic goals. As noted, the enhanced advising services program did not provide direct academic assistance, such as tutoring or classroom help. Rather, staff advisers met regularly with program group students during the two-semester intervention to monitor their academic progress and offer advice on class scheduling, means of ad-

²⁴In fact, among the larger Opening Doors impact sample, only about 25 percent to 30 percent of the comparison group students took SD 10.

ministrative relief for academic problems, balancing work and school responsibilities, and future academic avenues.

Interviews with the students revealed that Opening Doors staff encouraged them to arrange class schedules in ways that accommodated their other obligations to work and family. Most of the program group students in the sample took three or four classes per semester, while comparison group students who were interviewed took up to six classes per semester. Comparison group students were more likely to report getting into difficulty because of unbalanced schedules, and because of the need to drop classes that conflicted with outside obligations. Interestingly, however, some comparison group students reported that such problems were a thing of the past, suggesting that they had learned balance through trial and error. Program group students, however, were able to avoid these difficult lessons through individualized advising attention. Program group students, in fact, rated help with class scheduling as one of the most important forms of assistance they received from Opening Doors. In contrast, although academic advising was available to the comparison group students, most of them did not use it.

CLASS WORK

Although students in the program group reported receiving significant assistance in managing their schedules, their experiences in the areas of class work, studying, and interaction with faculty differed little from those of the comparison group. Both program and comparison group students, for example, reported that their assignments were challenging. Most believed that they were much more difficult than what they were asked to do in high school, and that their high schools did not prepare them well for college-level work. The responses were consistent across research groups.

High school was a joke. You learn the same things all four years in English class. You didn't learn anything that prepared you for the papers you were going to have to write in college or the amount of study time...[High school] didn't teach me anything. Where's the challenge? My senior year English class we watched Monty Python movies the entire year! So how was that preparing us for college English?

Although students in both the program and comparison groups believed that their performance was at least "OK," and that the faculty members were knowledgeable and caring, students in both groups reported that they had difficulty finding time to study.

For many students who were interviewed, especially those who had waited a few years after high school to attend college, the transition was not easy. A student noted that initially the course work she took at Lorain had been easy, but when she took the college English course, she began to struggle. She said that she had expected college to be easier, but "because I stayed out of

school for three or four years, it was difficult to get back to the routine.” After a particularly difficult English class, she withdrew and then decided to drop out of school entirely. Other students confirmed that their schoolwork became progressively more difficult as they advanced in their major or took advanced-level classes. “The first semester seemed so easy,” was a common sentiment. Even students who found the course work manageable did not take it lightly: “It takes time. It’s not something you can just rush through. And that’s what I’m used to from high school.”

STUDYING

What students report about their study habits goes a long way toward describing their commitment to their own academic success. How are these students studying? Are they able to put in 100 percent? If not, what stands in the way?

In their study habits, the students across research groups had a lot in common. All the students reported that they spent time daily on their studies, either doing homework, reading in preparation for class, or studying for exams. Students generally squeezed in studying when and where they could. Students in both groups primarily studied at home, but some were able to study on campus and others were able to fit in study time at work.

The amount of time they were able to devote varied, however. Those with more child-care responsibilities, for example, were usually unable to spend as much time studying as they would have liked, as one young mother explained: “I’m so tired sometimes when I put my daughter to sleep that I fall asleep with her. Then I miss out on studying. I can’t study when my daughter is up, so I think that’s a big problem.” Surprisingly, few students mentioned problems with child care during the day that conflicted with their ability to attend class or go to work. They were more concerned with balancing studying and taking care of their children during the evening. Students with children reported that they often had to study at night when their children were asleep, or “sneak” time when their children were with other caretakers. These students expressed great frustration over this distraction from studying. Other hindrances to studying for these students included personal problems or work schedules.

Studying in groups was one way suggested by counselors to help manage course work demands. However, this was not a popular option with students in either interviewed group. Although many of the students reported that they did class work in groups, most did not enjoy it: “I’d much rather work on my own. I have trouble trusting other people. If I get a B, I want it to be because of me, not because someone else slacked off.” Another student preferred to work alone, because “sometimes people don’t understand you or second-guess you.”

A number of students reported that they chose to study alone because the potential to waste time chatting with other students was too high. One student noted that this was a problem, “especially with other females; they tend to talk about what they did over the weekend or talk

about the guy who's walking past, and I can't stay focused. That's what I did last semester, so this semester I'm trying to do everything myself, and then make time to study with other people, so that I can learn [the subject] and not learn about their life." These typically older students, with their packed schedules and many responsibilities, had no time to waste. "I prefer working individually. Usually with groups you have to meet outside of class, and that's hard for me because of my schedule."

One student, a few years out of high school, talked about working with a group of younger students: "They wouldn't stay focused long enough. That made it hard for me because they were focused on stuff that was a little less important. Age-wise I think that was probably the reason."

FACULTY

The study found little difference between the research groups in their relationship with the Lorain faculty. The students reported a range of contact with faculty, from having very little interaction to having some teachers go above and beyond to help them: "From here to Cleveland he drove, and brought me the homework to the [hospital] room and told me what I needed to get done. That really surprised me. I was really shocked."

Most also reported that the faculty created a positive learning environment. Students in both groups generally agreed that the faculty were approachable and accessible, held regular office hours, and shared phone numbers or e-mail addresses with students. Most students believed that the professors were concerned about them and wanted them to succeed in college. According to the students, the faculty had high expectations that students would meet the responsibilities of college work and supported those expectations by being personally available to help them with both their academic and personal problems. Interestingly, students reported that most of the interactions with faculty centered not on class content but on scheduling or other personal conflicts that prevented them from meeting the demands of their courses. This may have been a result of the complex lives of these students.

PERFORMANCE AND GRADES

In terms of students' perceptions of their own performance in school, there was again little difference between the program and comparison group students. Most held views ranging from "doing OK" to "doing very well." Many of the high-performing students held high expectations for themselves: "I'm doing really good. I know I'm getting A's in all my classes. I don't wanna get B's." Although students generally rated their academic performance positively, several identified challenges to their performance, particularly outside obligations, as the following students noted:

I'm just making it and I know I could be doing a lot better, but it's really all the outside obligations that I have that make it hard. I don't have the time. I could apply myself a lot better. My grades are just average.

I've struggled a lot, though, and had personal issues that I let interfere with my grades, so my GPA hasn't been what I wanted it to be. I'm doing better now because I haven't had any conflicts, but if it doesn't work this semester I told my dad I might be done. With my job and my son being sick, last semester was really difficult for me.

Students identified several issues or circumstances that interfered with their schoolwork, including child rearing, family conflict, work responsibilities, and health problems.

Barriers to academic performance were divided somewhat by program group at Lorain. The two groups shared the challenges of child rearing and work schedules, but differed in other ways. In this small sample, the program group students were more likely to have faced issues of health or relationships that interfered with their ability to perform and remain enrolled in college, while the comparison group students were more likely to have mentioned lack of personal ability or inadequate preparedness for college. As noted earlier, this small sample was not necessarily representative of the larger study sample.

Students who had performed poorly were often frustrated by their failures, as this slightly older male student attested:

When you fail a class or you have to repeat a class, it's real frustrating because, especially being an adult, you want to do everything the first time....It's just the mentality we have as adults: We want to do it right and we want to do it perfect the first time, because if we do it again, we'll think that everyone else probably thinks you're stupid. So I would reach out for help in a heartbeat now.

They may also have been feeling the pressure of the higher stakes that come with adulthood: If they fail, they hurt their families, and they have less time and money to fix the problems.

Kingsborough Community College

As noted, the Opening Doors intervention at Kingsborough Community College used a learning community approach that linked an academic content course, such as speech, psychology or health, with an English course, which for most was at a developmental level. The students also took the one-credit freshman orientation SD 10 course. Assignments were coordi-

nated across classes and evaluated by both the English and the content course faculty. A weekly mandatory tutoring session was intended to improve skills being developed in classes. Students in the program received personalized attention from both faculty members about their course work, and from a student development counselor about individual academic, career, and personal issues. In addition to the enhanced learning opportunities derived from the learning communities, it was expected that students in the program group would form friendships with students in their “link.” These friendships could be both personally beneficial and functional, offering students a social network on which to rely for assistance and support in and beyond the program semester. This was intended to counteract the isolation students often experience at a commuter campus.

As was the case with Lorain students, program and comparison group students at Kingsborough were asked about their class work, study habits, relationships with faculty, and grades. In addition, program group students were asked about various details of their participation in the intervention, including relationships formed in their linked classes and any advantages and disadvantages of taking all their classes with the same set of students during the research semester. After the research semester, they were also asked to compare their relationships with learning community faculty to those with other general faculty, and whether they believed the coordinated classes helped them to learn.

Class Work

Most students reported that the content of their classes was “easy” or only moderately challenging.²⁵ However, they also acknowledged that they were still taking lower-division classes and that classes were likely to become more difficult with time. Similar to Lorain students, many believed that they were ill prepared by their high schools for college-level work, as one student said:

[I]n college, it’s a lot different. It’s like you’re on your own. You have to do stuff on your own. No one is...babysitting you....That’s the difference. In high school, they just gave us high school work. For example, in high school they didn’t teach me how to write essays and stuff....So when it came to the college [English] entrance exam, I failed it.

²⁵These statements should not be construed as suggesting that the academics at Kingsborough were less than rigorous. They more likely reflected the fact that the majority of students had moved immediately from high school to college, while the Lorain students were more likely to have been out of school for several years, and perceived the transition back to school as much more difficult — regardless of any actual differences in the rigor of schoolwork. In addition, most of the Kingsborough students in the Opening Doors Learning Communities program were taking at least one remedial course, which also could have colored their opinions.

Most students believed that as long as they had enough time, their class work would remain manageable. They had few responsibilities that interfered with their ability to study. Students in both groups also felt that professors did a good job of linking their course work to the real world.

Although the similarities in responses between the program and comparison groups on the subjects outlined above were striking, one clear difference emerged: Program group students were more likely than comparison group students to report that they liked working in groups. Most saw the benefits of getting feedback from others: “[T]hat’s the best way to interact with people, to get feedback.... You’ll read my paper, I’ll read yours, you’ll give me feedback, even if its not good feedback, and I may not want to hear it. You’ll give me feedback on how to improve.” It seemed that the daily exposure to group work in linked classes led to its acceptance by the program group students who were interviewed. Over time, they built trust with their fellow students and were able to benefit from feedback and criticism. The absence of this emphasis on group work in subsequent semesters may affect the performance of program group students relative to this initial semester.

The comparison group students, on the other hand, were more like the students at Lorain who generally objected to working with other students. It seemed that the Opening Doors intervention at Kingsborough succeeded in building trust among participants during the research semester.

Studying

All the students in the comparison group and most of the students in the program group reported that they studied regularly. In terms of their ability to study, program and comparison group students were more similar than different. Most fit in studies after school, most studied at home, and many also studied on their long commutes to and from Kingsborough. Unlike Lorain students, none of the Kingsborough students had family responsibilities that interfered with their ability to study, although a few mentioned conflict with work schedules. As one student put it:

I struggle, sometimes, with coming home from work, and it’s hard to pick up that book. I’m not going to lie — sometimes I put my book bag down and I won’t pick it up till the morning. Sometimes I just have to get focused. I just automatically lay down after I eat...but I have to just get focused and study. I have to get the energy and studying into my schedule.

Perceptions of their own performance in school ranged from “OK” to “great,” and this was true for both program and comparison group students. Few believed that they were performing poorly. Those with the highest perceptions of performance also generally expressed high expectations for themselves, echoing the students at Lorain: “Anything below a B+ is failing to me.”

Perhaps because most students rated their performance as at least adequate, few sought or enjoyed tutoring. Those who sought tutoring in the comparison group thought it was generally helpful. Program group students, in contrast, typically rated their tutoring experience negatively. Tutoring was mandatory in Kingsborough's Opening Doors program, and this may be one reason it received such low marks.

That was one thing about Opening Doors that I really didn't like! Because we were in the program, they thought it was convenient to impose on us one hour every week of English tutoring, which was totally unnecessary, which was totally a waste of my time, which was totally frustrating...It was just a waste of our Mondays.

Students such as the one quoted above, who felt they were doing well in school and thus did not need tutoring, were nevertheless forced to attend, which led to resentment and a perception that it was a waste of time. None of the program group students used tutoring services in the semester following Opening Doors.

Faculty

Program group students reported a range of experiences with faculty. Some reported that Opening Doors faculty members were more caring and more likely than their post-Opening Doors professors to reach out to them: "Nobody compares to [my Opening Doors professors]. They are wonderful." Others reported no differences.

Most of the program group students rated positively the educational experience of linked classes. They seemed to appreciate the opportunity for enhanced learning between the two courses, which they felt would not have been possible otherwise. They also believed the course work was balanced between the two main courses. As one student explained:

[My English class in Opening Doors] helped me a lot...It had the structure and writing and helped me express myself better...In high school I thought I was writing essays fine, until I came here and [my English teacher] showed that it wasn't; that my writing wasn't OK. But I improved a lot on my writing since I took it.

This student went on to explain that the content teacher gave them "the facts," while the English teacher "was getting us to organize our facts and express it in a way where we can explain it better." Another student echoed this appreciation of the enhanced learning experiences through coordinated assignments. The professors, she said, of both her English 92 and psychology classes would read drafts of the dually assigned paper: "Our English teacher, he would like revise it and give it to us, and we would do it over, which would make a better grade."

This student believed this approach enhanced her learning. Some program group students at Kingsborough also reported that the comments they received on assignments were more extensive than in nonlinked classes, and rated them as more helpful, as this student explained:

She [the English 93 professor] would give you comments and stuff like that on your papers...like, “This is great but...” She’ll want you to improve....She’ll tell you “you have to do this,” from certain comments. If you write it this certain way, it’ll be better. She’ll always leave comments like that, not just “OK, fine.” Even if you didn’t have time to finish something, she’ll always take the time to go over it with you on her own time. She’ll always speak to you, you can e-mail her, she was very caring.

The students who were interviewed generally felt that the joint assignments were less work, even though they might have to write more drafts than in traditional courses, because they resulted in fewer individual or disjointed assignments.

Another student reported that the reading material in English reinforced her understanding of economics. “So every time we read stories,” she said, “we somehow related it to our economics class. So...I think it was kind of important. I don’t think it was hard. Sometimes I had difficulties, but most of the time it was OK.”

Overall, these students recognized and appreciated the opportunity to reinforce lessons across classes. They also appreciated the additional scrutiny and the opportunity to learn through revisions. Most also had similarly positive comments about the Opening Doors faculty — describing them as smart and caring, as reflected in one student’s comments:

The ones I had [in Opening Doors] would talk to you after class, especially my English teacher. You would...make an appointment with him and he would...talk to you and explain what you need to do on the paper. And yeah, I got to be close to him...and now the teachers [in traditional classes], they don’t care where you’re from, they don’t care if you work.

Students also spoke highly of their SD 10 counselors: “She was wonderful, I have to say. She’s amazing. I was in her office every day. She was always there and she always helped me.”

SD 10 counselors sometimes acted as liaisons between teachers and students. One student reported that some students were uncomfortable with a particular content teacher at the beginning of the semester — they felt he was boring. The students brought the issue to their SD 10 teacher, who sat in on the class. She agreed with the students, encouraged them to engage the teacher more, and told them it was their responsibility to participate in class to make it interesting and a place they could learn.

Students appreciated the information gleaned from the SD 10 course about campus orientation, studying, and academic and career planning, and most believed the information was relevant and useful, even if they did not always use it (for example, some reported they did not use the study skills they learned in SD 10). Some students continued to rely on these teachers for advising and support after the Opening Doors semester ended.

Although comparison group students on the whole had less than program group students to say about the faculty, this may have been because they had no point of comparison. More than half of the comparison group students who were interviewed said they felt they had “good” relationships with faculty members, and many noted that the faculty were accessible and held regular office hours. However, others felt that the faculty cared very little about them; some had a more mixed assessment, reporting that the teachers were just there to do a job like anyone else. These students generally were comfortable talking in class and asking questions, but were unlikely to approach faculty members after class. Although they were unlikely to reach out to the faculty, they perceived them as accessible.

Students also commented on the general atmosphere of the linked classes. Some experienced a conflict in the linked classes between feeling dependent, as if they were still in high school, and the independence they sought in the college experience. Although they appeared to like that the fact that, just as in high school, someone “holds their hand,” at the same time, they wanted to move beyond that experience and be more independent. One student explained:

Opening Doors was interesting because I met a lot of people. It was...sometimes I thought they was treating me like I was in high school, because it was like the two teachers are connecting the work together, and that's just high school stuff. But sometimes it was better, because if this teacher doesn't want to give me all that work and the other teacher slacks off, so it kind of connects. So it was good in a way and it was bad in a way. They balanced it.

Or as another student said:

It's so much different into normal college life because in Opening Doors, they made it so much more interactive. I knew everyone in my classes and I went to all my classes. I mean, you had a sense of being in high school, but then at the end of the day it felt good because you knew the students. I made a close friendship with two girls in my class.

This conflicted yearning for both dependence and independence likely reflected their stage in life, at a transition point from adolescence to adulthood.

Most students were able to make friends in the linked classes, and those friendships proved useful, as the following student suggested:

We try to help each other. We're together in two classes so we know each other better.

Opening Doors was fun! We went to our classes and we did well!...I had a friend...and we got so close through the OD semester that we would compete among ourselves to see who would get the highest grade in our English class, you know? And sometimes she would and sometimes I would, but if I got the lower grade, she would be like, "Come on — you know you have to beat me next time!"

She continued, comparing her Opening Doors experience with her experience in regular classes after the research semester ended:

And now [post-Opening Doors], I go to my classes and no one even takes me on! I hardly know anybody, like if I need to call somebody for something, I don't know anybody to call, because I have no friends [in class]. It's just me alone in these big classes.

As these students' comments suggested, many of the friendships made during Opening Doors were fleeting, seldom extending beyond the Opening Doors semester. Few were able to take classes with friends in the subsequent semester. Others only saw their former "link-mates" in the hallways with time enough only for a quick update.

Finances and Stipends: Paying for College, Books, and Self

Many community college students grapple with the expense of college. Although community colleges are more affordable than most four-year schools, finances are nevertheless difficult for many. Most students who were interviewed relied on partial or full financial aid. As part of the Opening Doors demonstration, students at Kingsborough were also offered book stipends of \$150 over the course of their program involvement, and Lorain students were offered \$150 each semester to use as they needed.

Lorain County Community College

Most of the Lorain students who were interviewed were financially independent of their parents, and indeed, they faced a range of financial responsibilities, from housing, food, child

care, and transportation to college tuition and fees. Most worked at jobs to cover these costs. All also were living in low-income households.

The financial aid the students received in both the program and comparison groups was sufficient to cover the costs of tuition, books, and supplies. All of the students who were interviewed in the comparison group received financial aid. In contrast, not all students in the program group received aid, in some cases because they missed financial aid deadlines and asked their parents to help out, or for other administrative reasons. For those who did receive aid, most reported that the money exceeded their school costs, and that they used the surplus to pay bills and other personal expenses.

Although for most students, financial aid was not a problem, a few reported some challenges, and this was especially true for program group students, who reported many more financial aid problems than the comparison group students.²⁶ Problems included insufficient grant amounts or receiving a bill for a semester in which they had withdrawn. In fact, students more often spoke of bureaucratic hassles and complications rather than of any personal financial struggle. They also noted that they often received help from Opening Doors staff with navigating administrative hurdles. Some comparison group students reported financial problems; however, they noted more often difficulty covering personal expenses rather than paying for school. Opening Doors targeted low-income students, and thus both program and comparison students were likely to face tight budgets, as was reflected in some of their personal stories. A comparison group student, for example, reported that because her public assistance grant did not stretch far enough to allow her to eat lunch on campus, she had to wait until she got home to eat. Another student reported falling behind on her credit card bills when she stopped working to attend school full time. Yet another student reported going without a telephone for five years until just a few months before the interview, and having trouble paying for health-related costs, as her job did not provide health insurance.

As noted, program students at Lorain received \$150 for each of the two semesters they participated in the demonstration. In each semester, the first \$100 was paid after an initial required advising meeting early in the semester, and the remaining \$50 was paid after the second required meeting mid-semester. Students often used the stipends to pay for necessities, such as bills, groceries, and car-related expenses. One student said, "It came in handy for when my daughters needed anything. It worked out good for me. I used it for bills, Pampers, and school supplies. Any help, I appreciate it." Another student mentioned using the Opening Doors stipend money to buy clothes for her daughter. When asked if the \$150 was enough to make a difference she replied, "Oh yeah. You don't look for it, but when it comes, it comes in handy."

²⁶This is likely just random variation, however, given the small sample size.

When students were asked what they would change about the stipend, most said they would not change anything; however, a few said they would raise the amount to \$200.

Kingsborough Community College

Although the students at Kingsborough were more likely than their counterparts at Lorain to rely on their parents for financial support, finances were still a concern. Although few of the students who were interviewed at Kingsborough had to worry about paying for housing, food, or child care, many nevertheless felt the need to earn their own spending money for clothes, cell phone bills, and transportation. Others, however, relied fully on their parents for financial support.

The Kingsborough students had a wide array of financial aid options. Financial aid for most students was sufficient to cover all of their school costs. Others combined financial aid with parental support. Only a few were completely responsible for their own school expenses (some did not apply for financial aid owing to their immigration status) or relied completely on parental support. The study found no differences in financing options between the program and comparison group students.

Most students, both in the program and the comparison groups, reported that they had yet to experience any financial aid problems. Several students reported that family, high school guidance counselors, or others helped them to learn about and apply for financial aid. Program group students viewed the \$150 stipends positively, and used them for both books and supplies and to supplement their transportation costs, as they could use the money to buy transit cards at the campus bookstore. Many Kingsborough students complained about the high prices of their books. One student said, “Books will kill your pocket.” Students seemed more appreciative of the money, because during the semester in which they were interviewed, many had to pay for their books on their own. Another student said, “That money did help. Buying books this semester [after Opening Doors] was hard. On top of your whole tuition lump sum, you have to buy books totaling almost tuition, but you do it. Close your eyes and do it.” Most students said the stipend was enough to cover all of their books, but a few said the \$150 was not sufficient.

Maturity and Development: Age and Experience Differences in the Opening Doors Qualitative Study

Young adulthood is a time when individuals must contend with commitments — to people, jobs, values, and ideologies. Young adulthood is also a time of learning to balance autonomy and responsibility, as was evident in the sense of conflict experienced by some Kingsborough students who described feeling “babied,” and yet appreciated the support Opening Doors provided.

In the past, social roles and norms created space for youth leaving adolescence to assume the mantle of adulthood. Today, however, paths to adulthood are less clear-cut, for a multitude of reasons.²⁷ In order to explore the transition to adulthood and the role community colleges might assume in the transition process, the study took advantage of a fortuitous difference between the students at the two campuses in both age and “markers” of adulthood. In addition to comparing the program and comparison groups, therefore, the study also parsed differences by age, and perhaps by default, maturity. Some of those distinctions are briefly explored here, using as a backdrop the emerging findings on rapidly changing models of the transition to adulthood.

These subsequent analyses revealed age to be a significant demarcation of student experience. Older students differed from younger students in both perspective and experience. This difference persisted across campuses; but, as noted, most of the younger students were enrolled at Kingsborough, and most of the older students were at Lorain. However, the themes seemed to persist, even for older students at Kingsborough and younger students at Lorain.

The younger students were most easily characterized as exploring issues of “early maturity,” having not yet progressed very far down the path to adulthood. They were, for the most part, still dependent on their parents for the basics, such as shelter and food, and also for broader financial and emotional support. Although many worked, according to their own reports they typically earned only enough to cover the costs of incidentals such as transportation, books, and school supplies. This early maturity stage is characterized by the following:

- Differentiation from one’s high school self — the high school self was less of an independent thinker, more likely to be concerned with popularity or socializing, more closed to new ideas, less likely to interact with people different from themselves, and less focused on academic concerns.
- Freedom — to make decisions for themselves, be responsible for their own performance in school, and pay the consequences of those decisions. Several younger students reported that their parents had stopped asking them how they were doing in school, which differed greatly from their high school experiences. That said, these students still had few significant responsibilities beyond themselves. No one reported any substantial family obligations, and certainly none that interfered with their ability to engage in school.

²⁷Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005).

- Less focus on socializing — several students noted that since coming to college they had become less social, “more boring,” and more focused on their education, with “no more fooling around.”²⁸
- Limited external challenges — Most of the younger students reported that they had either faced no challenge or only an academic challenge since entering college.
- Growing up — Most noted a general “maturing” since entering college, which seemed to focus primarily on making better choices and being more responsible for themselves.

Although these students were beginning to experience issues faced by adults, they were still largely sheltered from full adulthood, and their motivations for attending school were as yet unconnected to the demands of adulthood. In fact, many younger students reported being in college only because their parents insisted on it. Those younger students with specific motivations cited career goals (albeit vague), a desire to make more money, or a love of learning. Surprisingly few mentioned a desire for a bachelor’s degree.²⁹ In research exploring the developmental and psychological aspects of emerging maturity during the transition to adulthood, an interesting aspect emerging is “planful competence,” or the ability to set realistic goals and, equally important, take the concrete steps to attain them. The career goals of several of the students at Kingsborough indicated a decided lack of such competence — “I want to have a career in mechanical engineering or maybe nursing or business management. . . I like doing things with my hands,” or the student with a passing interest in biology, so “maybe I could become an obstetrician.” Perhaps, then, more supports at the community college level could be explored to better encourage this development.

The older students who were interviewed at Lorain, in contrast, were largely self-reliant. Most had made the full transition to “adulthood,” as typically measured. They were living independently, working, rearing children, and had had, or were in, a relationship.³⁰ Most of these older students described their reasons for attending college more clearly, and related them more specifically to a career goal (popular majors included nursing and other medical professions, or business-related subjects). They also more often mentioned a desire to advance from

²⁸Interestingly, in a forthcoming book by researchers in the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, several of the young adults interviewed associated adulthood with “boring” roles. See Toguchi Swartz, Rumbaut, and Hartmann (forthcoming).

²⁹The interview protocol did not include a specific question regarding baccalaureate degrees. Most of the Kingsborough students interviewed did say they had plans to obtain a college degree or transfer to a four-year school, which would require that they earn an associate’s degree.

³⁰See Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005) for more information on the traditional markers of adulthood and how they have changed over the course of the last century.

their current low-wage job. Again, in contrast to the younger students at Kingsborough, about half of the older students expressed a desire to pursue a bachelor's degree. Interestingly, although many older students reported strong support from family members for their education and career goals, several were motivated to succeed in college in order to "prove wrong" a nay-saying family member. Many of these students were additionally motivated to improve opportunities and be better role models for their children.

These age- and maturity-related distinctions are interesting, in that they point out the role of developmental age in the success of the college experience — and may have implications for the design and implementation of programs such as Opening Doors. Students at different stages of their lives may need different supports and services. In this era in which the path to adulthood stretches sometimes into the early 30s,³¹ consideration of students' place on the continuum between adolescence and adulthood may become increasingly important to college programs hoping to improve their students' retention and success. Students further along the developmental path toward adulthood may need more help balancing the traditional adult roles — family, work, and school — while students further back on the path may need more help with the developmental aspects of this transition, from formulating career plans and other goals to connecting those goals concretely to their college experience.

Summary and Discussion

The Opening Doors Qualitative Study analyzed interviews with students who had been randomly assigned either to receive program services from Opening Doors or to not receive them. The intent of the analysis was to highlight any unique effects that students in either group experienced in the Opening Doors demonstration.³² Students at both campuses were from low-income families. These findings are important on their own and as a complement to future impact findings. Differences between research groups aligned mainly with areas that the Opening Doors demonstration was designed to affect: academics, advising, and financial aid. The findings also reflected the slightly different approaches the two campuses took in designing their package of services in the demonstration.

³¹Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005); Côté and Allahaar (2005).

³²Again, given the small sample sizes, the comparisons are meant only to highlight the distinctions; they are not statistically significant differences.

Programmatic Findings

- **Program group students who were interviewed at Lorain received regular and individualized academic advice, which helped them avoid the pitfalls experienced by some of the comparison group students.**

These pitfalls included taking too many classes at once, skipping over recommended prerequisites, or arranging inconvenient class schedules. Although some comparison group students also used counseling and advising services, they described them as both less readily available and much less individually tailored than those described by program group students.

The relative quality and substance of the advice Lorain students received about these academic issues could conceivably affect their engagement or attachment to school. A 1989 study by Metzner found, for example, that first-year students who felt they had received high-quality advisement dropped out from public, four-year institutions at a rate 25 percent lower than those who believed their advising was of poor quality, and 40 percent lower than students who reported receiving no advice.³³ Although our sample is too small to be statistically significant, all of the students in the program group were enrolled at the time of the interview, while three of the comparison group students had withdrawn. As noted in the findings section, program group students reported that Opening Doors advising staff helped them in two primary ways. First, when students faced situations that could interfere with their continuation in school, such as a health emergency, Opening Doors staff worked with the students and their faculty members to prevent withdrawal. Second, if students did withdraw, Opening Doors staff helped with the petitions and letters necessary to reenroll upon their return. None of the comparison group students reported similar assistance.

- **At Kingsborough, the findings indicated that students in the program group (who participated in linked classes) received more personal attention on assignments from professors than did comparison group students.**

Program group students wrote more drafts of papers and received more in-depth comments in their linked classes than did their comparison group classmates. They reported that they were able to learn from these comments and improve their work and, generally, that they appreciated the added attention.

Program group students also praised their Opening Doors professors. Many reported that they felt the Opening Doors faculty cared about them and how they were doing in school. When comparing Opening Doors faculty members with those they had in the subsequent post-research semester, most favored the Opening Doors faculty. Most of the comparison group stu-

³³Metzner (1989).

dents felt their relationships with faculty were “good,” but none reported comparable interactions relative to the program group.

- **The student development counselors acted as an academic “early warning system” for program group students at Kingsborough.**

Recall that at Kingsborough the SD 10 course was a mandatory part of the linked class offerings taken by program group students. Comparison group students at Kingsborough were encouraged but not required to take the course.

By coordinating with faculty in the “linked” classes, the SD 10 counselors monitored the academic performance of program group students. They would approach students who were “slacking off” and encourage them to apply themselves to their class work. They also played a liaison role for program group students who were having difficulty with professors in their link. Comparison group students at Kingsborough did not receive this same level of coordinated attention from their professors and counselors.

Although the sample sizes are too small to be conclusive, it would appear that this added attention helped the program group students engage more in school, at least during the research semester — and perhaps positively affected their retention, a key goal of the Opening Doors demonstration. This, too, mirrors findings from MDRC’s early focus groups, in which student participants frequently reported that they valued early warnings if their grades were beginning to suffer, and that calls or letters from counselors or professors often triggered their efforts to seek help.³⁴

- **The small stipend available to program group students at both campuses was appreciated and useful but did not substantially improve the finances of those who were interviewed.**

The final program element of the Opening Doors initiative was the financial stipend. At Kingsborough, the \$150 stipend was limited to purchases at the bookstore, while at Lorain, no limits were placed on how students could use the additional money. Students at Lorain had to meet with their adviser — four times over the course of the two-semester program — to receive the payments. Students at Kingsborough did not have to meet such requirements in order to receive their stipend. Interviews with students at either campus did not indicate that the stipend motivated them to participate in the program. The advising and academic components seemed to drive their participation to a much greater degree than the money.

³⁴Purnell and Blank (2004).

In this small sample, most students reported having adequate financial aid packages that covered their tuition, fees, books, and school-related incidental costs. Thus, most students perceived the stipend as helpful but less than essential to their financial needs. Some comparison group students at Lorain, in contrast, reported difficulties, not in paying for school but in covering personal costs. This was a common complaint in MDRC's early focus group studies as well. In addition, students at Lorain reported that Opening Doors staff often helped them navigate the financial aid bureaucracy, which may have made the process more seamless, with fewer complaints. In addition, the Kingsborough students were more dependent on their parents for financial support in covering expenses for rent and food, which may have made the \$150 less central in their minds.

- **Peer group attachment was marginally important to most of the interviewed students.**

Interestingly, given the research that stresses the importance of peer and social groups in students' connection to college,³⁵ the students who were interviewed did not particularly rely on the social opportunities available to them at college. Most students at either campus claimed to be uninterested in socializing, and those few who were interested, did not socialize on campus.

Generally, the students across campuses and treatment groups described their relationships with fellow students as pragmatic — helpful to learn about a missed assignment or class notes — but not for fun or social support. For most of the students, any even modest social connection did not extend beyond the classroom. It may have been too much to expect that true friendships could be created in a one- or two-semester program in a nonresidential college setting.

The students at Lorain preferred to “keep to themselves,” and focus on academics rather than socialize in school. In fact, a number of Lorain students noted that too much socializing took place in study groups, and for that reason they avoided them. In large part, this reflected their demanding outside lives, with children and other commitments. In other instances, students claimed to have put “partying” behind them, and were now intent on an academic and career path. The learning communities at Kingsborough were an explicit attempt to foster peer groups, and relative to all other students who were interviewed for this study, the Kingsborough Opening Doors students did develop more camaraderie with other students in their links. However, they reported that the friendships did not last much beyond the research semester.

These findings cannot refute the literature's identification of the importance of social connections, but perhaps those connections in community colleges should be fostered through

³⁵Tinto (1993).

carefully crafted academic enhancements, such as study groups, peer mentoring, and/or peer-led support groups for students with families or other demands.

Overall, the demonstration appeared to influence students as intended. Advisers assisted students with course work, and the advising proved helpful (and sometimes invaluable) in navigating college life. Further evidence that the demonstration had the intended effect is that students at Lorain, where Opening Doors focused on advising, more often spoke of the considerable help Opening Doors staff offered in navigating the college landscape — learning how to study at a college level or how to better balance work and school. Students at Kingsborough, however, whose program focused more on academics, more often stressed its academic value.

Additional Findings

- **Whether or not it was part of the treatment, students at both campuses who took the student orientation course generally felt it was useful.**

Students at Lorain were required to take their student development offering, SD 101, but not necessarily during their time in the Opening Doors demonstration. At Lorain, comparison group students were more likely to mention the value of the SD 101 offerings. It may be that the program group students at Lorain were finding equivalent help through the more robust advising services.

Program group students who were interviewed at Kingsborough appreciated the campus orientation and academic and career planning in SD 10, and most believed the information was relevant and useful, even if they did not always use it right away. The SD 10 counselors also provided course and major counseling. The influence of the course was so strong that some students continued to rely on these counselors for advice and support *after* the Opening Doors semester had ended.

- **Lorain students in both research groups faced many other outside demands that, in the absence of assistance, could overwhelm their efforts to balance the demands of school, work, and family.**

Interviews revealed time and again that these students found balancing work and parenting with class requirements difficult. According to their own reports, this prevented them from putting in enough study time, and as a result, for some, affected their performance. As part of initial planning for Opening Doors, MDRC organized several focus groups to explore the experiences of community college students. Many of the same issues and conflicts reported by the students who were interviewed at Lorain had tripped up students in the focus groups, causing them to drop out or to delay their college careers. As a result, the focus group students, too, placed a high value on academic advice and counseling. In fact, when students in the focus groups had negative

comments about the type of counseling available to control group students in this study, they generally mentioned that access to counseling was too little and sometimes came too late.³⁶

- **Students at different stages of maturity and development had different motivations for entering college.**

Many of the older students had clear career goals and were personally motivated to be in college, while many of the younger students did not and were not. Older students in the study, across research groups, shared challenges of combining the responsibilities of parenting, work, and school. Older students were also motivated to escape low-wage labor and provide a higher standard of living for their families. They saw college as a way to facilitate these changes. Younger students, in contrast, were much less burdened by these adult responsibilities. They were often externally motivated to attend college, or felt that college was a default choice after high school. Relative to older students, they seemed less clear on what they wanted from their college experience. Differences such as those observed between older and younger students may affect their ability to benefit from college and from a program like Opening Doors.

Future Directions and Program Development

These findings point to several final questions and areas for further research. First, who needs what? Subgroups, such as parents, full-time workers, older returning students, or younger students coming directly from high school, likely engage in college in ways different from one another. This suggests that there is no one recipe for success. Students need different sets of services at different points in their lives. Future research should explore how programs can determine what each subgroup needs in terms of advising, supports, modes of instruction, studying, completing assignments, and even participating in classes, and deliver services accordingly. The context of students' life challenges, maturity, needs, and competencies should be taken into account to an even greater degree than it has been in the Opening Doors demonstration, and in future community college interventions.

For example, younger students fresh out of high school, such as the students who were interviewed at Kingsborough, may need more career advice and direction — more help with their “planful competence” — and assistance with making their college attendance personal. Perhaps community colleges could provide such students with opportunities to connect a college education to the demands of the “real world,” through volunteer work and internships specially designed for younger students. These types of opportunities, such as organizing a study group or class presentation or a volunteer project in the local community, should give students the chance to exercise responsibility and self-determination. They should emphasize the re-

³⁶Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002); Purnell and Blank (2004).

wards and consequences of the decisions they make, and let the successes or failures of their efforts lie totally with them. Opportunities to learn responsibility could counteract the feeling expressed by students of being “babied,” or treated as if they were still in high school. Older students who are juggling family commitments with work and school, such as those who were interviewed at Lorain, may benefit from time management advice, flexibility in class scheduling and course work, and other supports and services to help them meet their multiple demands. For these students, flexibility seems to be key. Community colleges that facilitate this will best serve this student subgroup.

The results from the interviews with Kingsborough students suggest that learning communities can improve academic outcomes and social ties to some extent among younger, full-time students. However, can learning communities also improve academic outcomes and relationships among older students with more outside responsibilities, such as the students who were interviewed at Lorain? Similarly, can learning communities affect students attending school part time? How can linked classes affect retention for older students who are clearer about their goals and reasons for being in college? Without additional study, these effects for older, nontraditional students — an important and growing group in community colleges — will remain unanswered.

If students’ level of maturity and preparation affects their ability and motivation to engage in their studies, what can programs do to best prepare them for college and retain them when they enroll? Is it possible to design programs that impress on youth the importance of college for their futures? Should preparatory interventions be high school-based, pre-high school, or summer “bridge” style? MDRC’s early focus groups indicated generally that students understood the importance of college for their futures, although some believed that work experience was more important than a degree in advancing in a career.³⁷ Younger students who were interviewed, those without much work history, were less sure of college’s importance to their future employment opportunities. Older students, especially those who had worked before coming to college, had made that connection.

According to Grubb, students tend to fall into two groups: those who enroll knowing that they need higher education to get better jobs but feeling unsure of what occupation or career they want to pursue; and those with clear aspirations but with education plans not well matched to their goals.³⁸ These patterns were certainly evident in the students who were interviewed. Even students at Lorain, who were able to state clearly why they were in college, often were uncertain, after they enrolled, of what came next. Perhaps student development courses could be designed, with the maturity and life-course stage in mind, to more firmly impress on

³⁷Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002).

³⁸Grubb (2001). See also Purnell and Blank (2004).

students the link between course work and future careers. A more expansive approach might feature a student development center, where students could take part in career planning classes and receive one-on-one counseling and educational planning, or workshops to help students define career goals and clear academic strategies to achieve them. Programs might also pair students with mentors in a professional field who could advise them on careers as well as on academic matters.³⁹ For students who may lack personal motivation or clear goals, support systems to help them make the aforementioned connections and then keep them on track are likely important. The findings reported here suggest that developing a coordinated, early-alert system when students' grades are suffering or when they are at risk of academic failure might be an effective tool for keeping all students engaged.

If students experience challenges beyond the program's purview (such as personal responsibilities or problems), how can programs (1) get students to reveal these problems and (2) most effectively help students address them? Students who were interviewed at Lorain were often struggling to maintain a balance between their home lives and school. They appreciated the advising and other services that helped them navigate the college scene, whether by giving them a better understanding of which courses to take and when, or by moving them quickly and painlessly through the bureaucracy. But there were situations that they believed were beyond the scope of the program, even though those situations did materially affect their academic performance. Several of the students reported issues such as health problems or child care responsibilities that interfered with college. Feedback from the Opening Doors focus group studies reaffirmed that personal problems were a major impediment to their persistence and retention in school. This suggests that personal advising coupled with advice on where to find other available supports, such as child care or financial aid, might be helpful.

How far should programs go to help students find solutions to the problems that prevent them from being engaged in and staying in college? MDRC's early focus groups reported that students were often unaware of services and supports available to them. Therefore, an important strategy would be simple outreach to make students aware of services, whether at the community college or elsewhere. One-stop centers that house government social services information (or even personnel), campus services and supports, and other community-based supports could both better advertise their services and make access easier for time-pressed students.⁴⁰

These are just some of the questions and implications that emerged from interviews with Opening Doors students. The authors hope that this study can help future iterations of the Opening Doors program continue to improve and better serve students who are taking this critical step in their lives, the first step on the road toward adulthood and future success.

³⁹For specific examples of some of these approaches, see Purnell and Blank (2004), p. 25.

⁴⁰Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002).

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