

**Enhancing Student Services  
at Owens Community College**  
**Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration  
in Ohio**

**Susan Scrivener  
Michael Pih**



**April 2007**

## Funders of the Opening Doors Project

The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation  
Ford Foundation  
The George Gund Foundation  
The James Irvine Foundation  
The Joyce Foundation  
KnowledgeWorks Foundation  
Lumina Foundation for Education  
MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health  
MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood  
National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development  
(RO1 HD046162)  
Princeton University Industrial Relations Section  
Robin Hood Foundation  
The Spencer Foundation  
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## Overview

Community colleges offer an important pathway to better jobs and higher earnings, especially for individuals who might otherwise lack the financial or academic preparation to pursue higher education. Research suggests, however, that many community college students want to earn a degree, but are hindered by the competing demands of work and family and by institutional barriers, such as inadequate student support services and insufficient financial aid. MDRC and a consortium of funders launched the Opening Doors demonstration in 2003 to study the effects of community college programs designed to help students persist in school and earn a credential.

This report presents early results from the Opening Doors program at Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio, which operated from 2004 through 2006. The program served students whose family income was below 250 percent of the federal poverty level and who were either incoming freshmen or returning students who had completed fewer than 13 credits and had a history of academic difficulties. The two-semester program provided enhanced student services and a \$150 scholarship each semester (for a total of \$300), which was paid after required advising sessions. Students were assigned to an academic adviser, with whom they were expected to meet frequently to discuss their academic progress and issues that might affect their schooling. Each adviser worked with no more than 185 students. Program participants also sometimes met with a designated contact in the financial aid office and received free one-on-one tutoring in the college's Learning Center. In contrast, other students at Owens had access to academic advisers, as needed, at a walk-in center, which employed one staff member for roughly every 1,000 students. Students could visit the college's Learning Center, where they typically received tutoring assistance in a group. If they needed more individualized help, they could receive one-on-one tutoring for a nominal fee.

MDRC is evaluating Owens' program using a random assignment research design. Students were assigned in a lottery-like process either to a program group that received Opening Doors services or to a control group that received the college's regular services. Analysis of transcript data shows:

- **Owens' Opening Doors program increased registration rates while students received services.** Students in the program group were more likely than students in the control group to re-enroll in college after one semester, and they registered for more credits. However, they were more likely to withdraw from at least one course, so they did not earn any more credits than students in the control group.
- **The increase in enrollment ended when the program's services ended.** In the semester after the program ended, enrollment and course registration rates for the two research groups were similar.
- **The positive effects on enrollment during the program gave Opening Doors students a slight advantage overall.** Results summarizing outcomes for students' first three semesters in the study show a very small increase in the number of semesters enrolled for the program group (they enrolled, on average, for an additional one-tenth of a semester).

The early results from Owens show that the program boosted enrollment in the short run but did not have a significant lasting effect. Future reports will track academic outcomes over a longer follow-up period to determine whether the early effects on enrollment reemerge, and will present results on a wider array of measures, including degree completion, transfer, employment, and well-being.



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## Preface

This is the fourth in a series of reports that present preliminary findings from MDRC's Opening Doors demonstration. MDRC launched Opening Doors in 2003 to study the effects of community college programs designed to help low-income students persist in school and earn a credential. Six community colleges in the demonstration each implemented a program that involved some combination of enhanced support services for students, increased financial aid, and reforms in curriculum and instruction.

Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio — the subject of this report — provided students with intensive advising services and a \$150 scholarship for each of two semesters. Participating students were assigned to an Opening Doors adviser, with whom they were expected to meet frequently to discuss academic progress. Students in the study's control group received Owens' standard student advising services at a walk-in center and were not eligible for the special scholarship.

Our study of student transcript data shows that the program at Owens had a modest but short-lived positive effect on enrollment rates, but no effect on other measures, such as credits earned.

The pattern of the results is similar to what we found at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, whose Opening Doors intervention was structured like the program at Owens. There was an increase in enrollment rates at Lorain, which was about twice as high as the increase at Owens. However, just as it did at Owens, the effect on enrollment at Lorain disappeared once the program ended. The results at Lorain also showed some modest positive effects on the number of credits earned and the number of courses passed in the second program semester.

This report does not represent a complete and conclusive examination of Owens' Opening Doors program. We will continue to track academic outcomes for the students at Owens over a longer follow-up period, and, in a future report, a more detailed analysis will use additional data sources to examine other dimensions of students' lives that may have been affected by the program.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President



## Acknowledgments

The Opening Doors demonstration is supported by several foundations and government agencies, which are listed at the front of this report. We are thankful for their generous backing and ongoing commitment. We owe special gratitude to the funders that focused in particular on the demonstration at Owens Community College: The George Gund Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and KnowledgeWorks Foundation.

We are also grateful to the administrators and staff at Owens who devoted time and energy to developing and running a new program and participating in a complex research project. Space does not permit us to name everyone who has played a role, but we would like to particularly acknowledge some individuals. President Christa Adams supported the college's involvement in the project from its inception. Linda Stacy, Bill Ivoska, Donna Gruber, and Chip Campbell worked closely with MDRC to develop the program model and fit the study's research procedures into the college's operations. Chip and Donna also oversaw the program's implementation. Donna has remained our main contact at the college, helped us acquire data for the study, and reviewed an earlier draft of this report.

Kita Graham, the Opening Doors coordinator, managed the day-to-day implementation of the program and supervised the staff for most of the study period. Laura Hiss played that role early on, helping operate the college's pilot Opening Doors program. They and the other Opening Doors advisers — Gwen Ames, Anna Cihak, Pat Dymarkowski, Beth Senecal, and Amy Towner — comprised the core of the program, recruiting and assisting students. Laurene Markis, Patricia Cardell, Marian Drummer, Marquita Johnson, and Linda Stanford provided valuable support and kept the program office running. We appreciate everyone's willingness to participate in activities related to the study, including interviews with MDRC staff during numerous campus visits. Finally, we are grateful for the help of Jason Stokes and Matthew Lewis, who provided the student transcript data and Opening Doors scholarship data to MDRC.

Many MDRC staff have contributed to Opening Doors and to this report. Robert Ivry developed the demonstration and provided guidance on the study, and Thomas Brock has led the evaluation of the Opening Doors programs. Two former MDRC employees played central roles in the study at Owens. Melissa Wavelet worked closely with the college's administrators to design the program and offered guidance to help them deliver services to students as intended. Janelle Sagness worked closely with Melissa and one of this report's authors on all aspects of the demonstration in Owens. Colleen Sommo oversaw the collection and analysis of the quantitative data used in this report, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes gave advice on the analysis of the program's effects, and Jed Teres programmed the Opening Doors scholarship data. All the current MDRC staff mentioned, along with Gordon Berlin, John Hutchins, and Margaret Bald, reviewed earlier drafts of

this report and provided helpful comments. Leo Yan provided report production assistance and conducted fact-checking. Joel Gordon, Galina Farberova, and Shirley James and her staff developed and monitored the random assignment and baseline data collection process. Margaret Bald edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the Owens students who participated in the study, and, in particular, those who answered surveys. We hope that the findings from Owens and the other sites in Opening Doors will be used to improve college programs and services for them and others in the future.

The Authors

## Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of reports that presents preliminary findings from the Opening Doors demonstration and evaluation.<sup>1</sup> MDRC launched Opening Doors in 2003 to study the effects of community college programs designed to help students persist in school and earn a credential. Community colleges play a central role in postsecondary education: They enroll about half of all college students nationwide and are accessible to millions of adults who might otherwise lack the preparation or financial means to pursue higher education. Research suggests, however, that many community college students want to earn a degree, but are hindered by the competing demands of work, family, and school, as well as by institutional barriers, such as inadequate student support services, insufficient financial aid, or poorly tailored instruction.<sup>2</sup> In fact, a national study found that only a third of students who began at community colleges obtained a degree within six years.<sup>3</sup> Findings from the Opening Doors demonstration will yield information about how to improve this rate of student success and will speak to the focus of the Spellings Commission — the U.S. Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education — on the need for investments that lead to better student outcomes.

With the aim of helping students succeed, community colleges in the Opening Doors demonstration each implemented a program that involved some combination of enhanced support services for students, increased financial aid, and reforms in curriculum and instruction. Owens Community College, in Toledo, Ohio — the subject of this report — provided low-income students with enhanced student support services and a modest scholarship for two semesters. Participating students were assigned to an Opening Doors adviser, with whom they were expected to meet frequently to discuss academic progress and resolve any issues that might affect their schooling. Each adviser worked with far fewer students than the college’s regular advisers, which allowed for frequent, intensive contact. Participating students were also eligible for a \$150 scholarship during each program semester, for a total of \$300. Students in the study’s control group received Owens’ standard student services and did not receive the special scholarship. The program, which the college called Owens Personalized Enhancement Network (OPEN), operated from fall 2004 through spring 2006.

To measure the program’s effects at Owens (and the other participating colleges), the Opening Doors evaluation is using an experimental research design. At each college, students who agreed to take part in the study were randomly assigned to a program group that received enhanced Opening Doors services or to a control group that received the college’s standard services. Both groups will be tracked over time to find out whether the enhanced services result in

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<sup>1</sup>The first three reports are Bloom and Sommo (2005), Brock and Richburg-Hayes (2006), and Scrivener and Au (2007).

<sup>2</sup>Brock and LeBlanc (2005).

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2002).

better outcomes for students. Random assignment ensures that the motivation levels and personal characteristics of students in the program and control groups were the same at the beginning of the study; hence, any subsequent differences in educational or other outcomes can be attributed with a high level of confidence to Opening Doors. MDRC is working with a group of scholars affiliated with the MacArthur Foundation-funded Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood<sup>4</sup> to determine whether the Opening Doors programs affect students' ability to complete more courses, earn better grades, and obtain college certificates and degrees. The evaluation is also examining the effects of the enhancements on students' employment, earnings, health, and other measures of personal and social well-being.

Five other colleges are participating in the demonstration: Lorain County Community College in Ohio; Kingsborough Community College in New York; Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson in Louisiana; and Chaffey College in California. Lorain tested an Opening Doors program very similar to the one implemented at Owens. (See Table 1 for a brief summary of each site's Opening Doors program and the students who were targeted.) Early findings from Lorain, which are presented in another report,<sup>5</sup> showed that the program improved students' outcomes while they participated, but the effects did not continue once the services ended. Early findings from the studies at Kingsborough and the participating colleges in Louisiana are promising, and suggest that learning communities, in which groups of students take some classes together, and scholarships tied to academic performance can improve students' outcomes.<sup>6</sup> These early results, based on a portion of each site's research sample, are by no means the last word on the programs at Lorain, Kingsborough, or the Louisiana colleges. Future reports will present findings for each site's full research sample over a longer follow-up period and will examine more outcomes.

The rest of this report focuses on the implementation and early effects of the Opening Doors program at Owens. The second section provides some background on the study, and the third section provides some information about the college, the target population and research sample, and the program's operation. The concluding section presents preliminary findings on

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<sup>4</sup>Members of the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood are Gordon L. Berlin (MDRC), Mark Courtney (University of Chicago), Sheldon Danziger (University of Michigan), Connie A. Flanagan (Pennsylvania State University), Frank F. Furstenberg (University of Pennsylvania), Vonnie C. McLoyd (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Wayne Osgood (Pennsylvania State University), Jean E. Rhodes (University of Massachusetts, Boston), Cecilia E. Rouse (Princeton University), Rubén G. Rumbaut (University of California, Irvine), Richard Settersten (Oregon State University), and Mary C. Waters (Harvard University). Christina Paxton of Princeton University is leading the evaluation component focused on health outcomes.

<sup>5</sup>Scrivener and Au (2007). A similar report will be published about the study at Chaffey College later in 2007.

<sup>6</sup>The Kingsborough results are presented in Bloom and Sommo (2005) and the Louisiana results are presented in Brock and Richburg-Hayes (2006).

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

**Table 1**

### Opening Doors Programs and Target Groups

| <b>Site</b>  | <b>Brief Program Description</b>  | <b>Target Group</b>  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Chaffey College</b><br>Rancho Cucamonga, California   | <b>College Survival Skills and Enhanced Student Services:</b> Students took a two-semester guidance course that provided instructional support as well as advising; students were required to visit the college's Success Centers, which provided extra academic support.   | Students ages 18-34 on academic probation who earned fewer than 35 credits and who either had a cumulative grade point average below 2.0 (C) or who did not complete at least half the courses in which they enrolled  |
| <b>Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson</b><br>New Orleans area, Louisiana | <b>A Scholarship Predicated on Academic Performance:</b> Students eligible for \$1,000 scholarship for each of two semesters; scholarship tied to maintaining at least half-time enrollment and a grade point average of 2.0 (C).   | Parents ages 18-34 whose family income was below 200 percent of the federal poverty level  |
| <b>Kingsborough Community College</b><br>Brooklyn, New York  | <b>Learning Communities and a Book Voucher:</b> Groups of students took three linked credit courses together; students received enhanced advising and tutoring and vouchers to pay for textbooks.   | Incoming freshmen ages 17-34 who planned to attend college full time   |
| <b>Lorain County Community College</b><br>Elyria, Ohio   | <b>Enhanced Student Services and a Modest Scholarship:</b> Students assigned to an Opening Doors adviser with a small caseload with whom they were expected to meet frequently; students had access to designated contact in financial aid office; students eligible for \$150 scholarship for each of two semesters, paid after mandatory meetings with adviser.   | Students ages 18-34 whose family income was below 250 percent of the federal poverty level and who were either incoming freshmen or who had completed fewer than 13 credits and had a history of academic difficulties |
| <b>Owens Community College</b><br>Toledo, Ohio   | <b>Enhanced Student Services and a Modest Scholarship:</b> Students assigned to an Opening Doors adviser with a small caseload with whom they were expected to meet frequently; students had access to designated contact in financial aid office; students eligible for free one-on-one tutoring; students eligible for \$150 scholarship for each of two semesters, paid after mandatory meetings with adviser. | Students ages 18-34 whose family income was below 250 percent of the federal poverty level and who were either incoming freshmen or who had completed fewer than 13 credits and had a history of academic difficulties |

the effects of Owens' Opening Doors program on measures of student performance and persistence, based on student transcript data.

## **Background on the Study at Owens Community College**

Researchers have been working for years 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 and ethnicity, high school performance, 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,<sup>7</sup> highlighting the need for broader theoretical frameworks for understanding student persistence in and completion of community college.

Tinto developed a theory that shifted the focus from students' background characteristics to their experiences after arriving on campus.<sup>8</sup> 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. Recently, Braxton and other scholars have reassessed Tinto's theory and attempted to delve more deeply 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.<sup>9</sup> These efforts place greater emphasis on cultural and organizational explanations for student persistence and success, and highlight the role that colleges themselves can play in fostering student persistence and program completion.

Guided, in part, by this body of research, MDRC developed the Opening Doors demonstration. After an extensive reconnaissance phase, which included a series of focus groups at six community colleges with current, former, and potential students, MDRC chose to focus on three broad strategies: enhanced student support services, increased financial aid, and curricular and instructional reforms.<sup>10</sup> Participating colleges were asked to operate programs that included at least two of the strategies.

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<sup>7</sup>Gates and Creamer (1984).

<sup>8</sup>Tinto (1993).

<sup>9</sup>Braxton (2002).

<sup>10</sup>See Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002) for a discussion of the focus group study.



Most, if not all, community colleges offer at least some student support services, but the nature and levels of funding for these services vary widely by state and institution. In his research on academic guidance and counseling, one of the most common set of student support services offered at community colleges, Grubb found that most states did not earmark monies specifically for these services; rather colleges funded them mainly from their general revenues.<sup>11</sup> He observed that, “like other services that do not directly generate enrollments and therefore revenues, guidance and counseling have often been relatively peripheral to community colleges.”<sup>12</sup>

Even though academic guidance and counseling is arguably the most important student service, most students receive minimal help. Nationally, the average community college employs one adviser for approximately every 1,000 students.<sup>13</sup> While colleges differ in how their advisers deliver services and the topics they cover, the necessity of working with many students tends to drive them toward a traditional problem-solving approach in which a student presents an issue and the adviser offers a quick response. The National Academic Advising Association urges community colleges and four-year colleges and universities to provide sufficient staffing, so that students and advisers can have ongoing, interactive relationships, and to adopt a developmental approach whereby advisers help students clarify personal goals and objectives, rather than simply approving their choice of courses.<sup>14</sup> The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) suggests that the availability of supports for learners, such as academic advising, leads to higher levels of student engagement. CCSSE uses student engagement as a yardstick for assessing whether, and to what extent, an institution’s education practices are likely to produce greater persistence and other positive outcomes for its students.<sup>15</sup>

In order to rigorously test the effects of enhanced student services at community colleges, MDRC sought out schools for the Opening Doors demonstration that were both interested in offering such services to a group of students who might need extra support and willing to participate in a random assignment evaluation. As discussed below, Owens Community College was interested and developed a program with MDRC that combined enhanced services with a modest scholarship.

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<sup>11</sup>Grubb (2004).

<sup>12</sup>Grubb (2001), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Grubb (2001).

<sup>14</sup>Gordon, Habley, and Associates (2000).

<sup>15</sup>Community College Leadership Program (2005).

## Opening Doors at Owens Community College

### The Environment

Owens Community College is located in Toledo, Ohio's fourth largest city, with a population just over 300,000. Over two-thirds (70 percent) of the city's residents are white, and about a quarter (24 percent) are black.<sup>16</sup> Toledo is in the northwest part of the state, on the western end of Lake Erie. It has a high concentration of manufacturing, including large automobile factories. In recent years, however, the number of jobs in manufacturing has declined, while the number in services industries, such as health care, has increased.<sup>17</sup> Toledo is home to a number of higher education institutions, including the University of Toledo, Davis College, and Mercy College of Northwest Ohio.

### The College

Owens Community College was chartered by the Ohio Board of Regents as a technical college in 1967. In 1994, the college was chartered as a comprehensive state community college, with a range of academic programs, although it has retained its technical and career programs. During the 2004-2005 school year, the most commonly awarded associate's degrees were in the following three areas: (1) Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences, (2) Business, Management, and Marketing, and (3) Engineering Technologies.<sup>18</sup> Owens offers classes at a main campus in Toledo, as well as at a campus in the nearby small city of Findlay. According to information reported by Owens to the U.S. Department of Education, 13 percent of freshmen who entered the institution in 2000 completed an associate's degree within three years. This is in the middle of the range of graduation rates for the Opening Doors colleges (rates range from 2 percent to 23 percent).<sup>19</sup>

During the fall 2004 semester, when the study began at Owens, the college served about 20,000 students, and, as at most community colleges, the majority (about two-thirds) attended part time. Just over half of the students were men and half were over 25 years old. The student body is predominantly non-Hispanic white. The in-state tuition at Owens for the 2004-2005 school year was \$2,680, and about three in every five first-time, full-time students received some form of financial aid.

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<sup>16</sup>The population figures for Toledo are from the 2000 U.S. Census.

<sup>17</sup>Bureau of Labor Market Information.

<sup>18</sup>The information in this section about the 2004-2005 school year and the graduation rate was drawn from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

<sup>19</sup>See Table 2.1 in Brock and LeBlanc (2005).

## **Program History**

In 2003, MDRC was working with administrators at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, to design and operate an Opening Doors program that provided enhanced student services and a modest scholarship. MDRC and some of the demonstration's funders were interested in including a second Ohio college in the study. Owens Community College emerged as a promising prospect, having already operated several initiatives aimed at helping low-income students. Owens' leadership was interested in the possibility of participating, and in late 2003, Owens and MDRC began working together. Various program interventions were discussed, but it was quickly agreed that Owens would implement a program very similar to Lorain's and target the same population. MDRC was pleased to have two separate tests of an enhanced student services intervention and to have the option of pooling the two colleges' research samples for analysis purposes.<sup>20</sup>

Over a period of several months, Owens and MDRC fleshed out the set of services, described below, that constituted the college's Opening Doors program. During the development phase, some Owens administrators visited Lorain to hear about their program, which had started about a year earlier, and their experiences with the study. The two colleges remained in touch throughout the implementation of their programs. Owens ran a small pilot of its Opening Doors program, serving about 35 students during the summer 2004 semester, and kicked off its full-scale program during fall 2004.

## **Targeting and Enrollment for Opening Doors**

To be eligible for the Opening Doors study at Owens, students had to meet the following criteria:

- Age 18 to 34
- Family income below 250 percent of the federal poverty level
- Beginning freshmen, or continuing students who have completed fewer than 13 credits and have had academic difficulties (indicated by not passing or withdrawing from courses)<sup>21</sup>
- High school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate

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<sup>20</sup>A future report on the two Ohio sites will pool the colleges' samples for some analyses.

<sup>21</sup>"Academic difficulty" was defined as completing no more than 75 percent of the credits attempted. For example, a student who had taken three three-credit courses and passed them all would not have been eligible for the study. A student who had taken four three-credit courses, passed three, and withdrew from or failed one would have been eligible.

- No associate's degree from an accredited college or university

The program was open to both part-time and full-time students. Owens' target population for Opening Doors was the same as Lorain's.<sup>22</sup>

During spring 2004, just before Owens began recruiting students for the study, MDRC arranged for the Opening Doors staff to receive assistance from a consultant with expertise in recruitment for (and operation of) workforce and education programs, who provided training and helped them develop their recruitment materials. Once a student was identified as eligible at Owens,<sup>23</sup> staff sent an initial invitation postcard or letter, which described the Opening Doors program, its potential benefits, and the study, and encouraged the student to call the office to set up an appointment for intake. Administrative staff working on the Opening Doors program (described below), as well as a few staff who were not part of the program, sent follow-up letters and made multiple phone calls to recruit students. When the Opening Doors team realized how time-consuming recruitment would be, they arranged with the college to get help from some staff in the college's Student Outreach Services (SOS) unit. SOS staff make phone calls to students at various points during the year to remind them, for example, about upcoming financial aid, registration, or payment deadlines. In interviews with MDRC, the Opening Doors team noted that the help of the SOS staff was very important in the recruitment effort.

The Opening Doors staff also posted flyers and posters around campus and at various community organizations and placed advertisements in newspapers and on radio and television. They also spent a lot of time trying to recruit students in person at various locations on campus — such as the bookstore, cafeteria, and enrollment and advising center. They tried to pique students' interest and do a quick screening to see if they might be eligible. If students were amenable, staff brought them to the Opening Doors office for a more formal screening and to complete the study's paperwork.<sup>24</sup> Owens staff reported that in-person recruiting was the most successful method, generating the most study participants. Once the program became established, word of mouth also helped the recruitment effort.

Because recruitment was very time-consuming, the research sample grew slowly. In order to generate a large enough sample, the Opening Doors staff at Owens began recruiting students well before each semester began. To randomly assign the group of students who entered

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<sup>22</sup>At Owens, students who participated in intercollegiate athletics were not eligible for the study, because they participated in another college program that was similar to Opening Doors.

<sup>23</sup>Owens used its student database to identify eligible students, and periodically generated lists.

<sup>24</sup>Staff checked the list of eligible students or used a simple tool that allowed them to screen the person on the spot, using the college's database.

the program in the spring 2005 semester, for example, staff began recruitment in September 2004 and randomly assigned students through January 2005.<sup>25</sup>

For the Opening Doors evaluation, as noted above, eligible students were randomly assigned to a program group that received enhanced student services and the scholarship or to a control group that did not. During study intake at Owens, college staff explained the purpose of the research, collected information on students' demographic characteristics, and obtained their written consent to participate in the study. Applicants who completed the process were given a \$20 gift card from a major discount store as both an incentive and compensation for their time. Once the study paperwork was complete, college staff telephoned MDRC with applicants' names and identification numbers, and MDRC's computer system made the random assignment to the program group or the control group. Students were informed which group they were in, and those in the program group were scheduled for a first appointment with an Opening Doors adviser.

A total of 1,241 individuals enrolled in the study at Owens. Sample enrollment took place between June 2004 and August 2005. Cohorts of program group students began participating in the Opening Doors program during the following three semesters: fall 2004, spring 2005, and fall 2005. Because Owens was still developing its recruitment strategies, the first cohort of students was the smallest — 224. The second and third cohorts each had over 500 students, more than twice the number of students in the first group.

### **Characteristics of the Opening Doors Sample**

Table 2 presents some selected characteristics of the 1,241 individuals who enrolled in the Opening Doors study at Owens. The information was collected by Owens staff just before each student was randomly assigned. As the table shows, 72 percent of the sample members are women. About half (51 percent) are non-Hispanic white, and just over one-third (36 percent) are black. Most sample members (70 percent) were 25 years old or younger when they entered the study, and their average age was 23.3 years. The vast majority (86 percent) were unmarried, and about half (51 percent) were parents.

Only about one-fourth of the sample (23 percent) reported that they were financially dependent on their parents. Almost all (97 percent) had worked for pay at some point, and over half (57 percent) were employed when they entered the study. Among those who were employed, almost three-fourths (72 percent) were working at least 21 hours per week.

Although the majority of the sample members (61 percent) had graduated from high school or received their GED within the past five years, a substantial proportion had done so

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<sup>25</sup>Lorain also conducted sample intake over an extended period. The effects of this will be examined in the report on the Ohio sites.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 2**

**Selected Characteristics of Owens Community College  
Sample Members at Baseline**

|  | Full<br>Sample |
|--|----------------|
| Gender (%)   |                |
| Male   | 28.1           |
| Female   | 71.9           |
| Age (%)  |                |
| 18 - 20 years old  | 38.0           |
| 21 - 25 years old  | 32.4           |
| 26 - 30 years old  | 19.5           |
| 31 and older   | 10.2           |
| Average age (years)  | 23.3           |
| Marital status (%)   |                |
| Married  | 14.5           |
| Unmarried  | 85.5           |
| Race/Ethnicity (%) <sup>a</sup>                                      |                |
| Hispanic   | 8.3            |
| White  | 50.7           |
| Black  | 36.4           |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native                                    | 0.3            |
| Asian or Pacific Islander  | 0.9            |
| Other  | 0.7            |
| Multiracial  | 2.6            |
| Number of children (%)   |                |
| 0  | 48.7           |
| 1  | 24.4           |
| 2  | 15.3           |
| 3 or more  | 11.6           |
| Among sample members with children:                                  |                |
| Average age of youngest child (years)                                | 3.0            |
| Household receiving any of the following benefits (%) <sup>b</sup> : |                |
| Unemployment/Dislocated Worker Benefits                              | 4.3            |
| Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or disability                     | 10.5           |
| Cash assistance or welfare (TANF)                                    | 12.9           |
| Food stamps  | 31.5           |
| None of the above  | 58.5           |
| Live in public or Section 8 housing (%)                              | 13.5           |
| Financially dependent on parents (%)                                 | 23.4           |
| Ever employed (%)  | 97.4           |

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**

|  | Full<br>Sample |
|--|----------------|
| Currently employed (%)   | 57.1           |
| <i>Among those currently employed:</i>                             |                |
| <i>Number of hours worked per week in current job (%)</i>          |                |
| 1-10 hours   | 5.1            |
| 11-20 hours  | 22.7           |
| 21-30 hours  | 29.4           |
| 31-40 hours  | 32.6           |
| More than 40 hours   | 10.2           |
| Highest grade completed (%)  |                |
| 8th grade or lower   | 1.3            |
| 9th grade  | 3.3            |
| 10th grade   | 5.0            |
| 11th grade   | 6.6            |
| 12th grade   | 83.8           |
| Diplomas/degrees earned <sup>b</sup> (%)                           |                |
| High school diploma  | 79.3           |
| GED  | 19.3           |
| Occupational/technical certificate                                 | 7.1            |
| Associate's degree   | 0.7            |
| 4-year (or more) degree  | 0.0            |
| None of the above  | 0.6            |
| Date of high school graduation/GED receipt (%)                     |                |
| During the past year   | 27.8           |
| Between 1 and 5 years ago  | 32.8           |
| Between 5 and 10 years ago   | 23.9           |
| More than 10 years ago   | 15.5           |
| Main reason for enrolling in college (%) <sup>b</sup>              |                |
| To complete a certificate program                                  | 8.9            |
| To obtain an associate's degree                                    | 44.0           |
| To transfer to a 4-year college/university                         | 27.5           |
| To obtain/update job skills  | 14.3           |
| Other  | 8.4            |
| Completed any college courses/credits (%)                          | 43.6           |
| First person in family to attend college (%)                       | 35.1           |
| Working personal computer in home (%)                              | 63.2           |
| Owens or has access to a working car (%)                           | 86.9           |
| Language other than English spoken regularly in home (%)           | 6.1            |
| U.S. citizen (%)   | 98.9           |
| Respondent born in U.S. <sup>c</sup> (%)                           | 97.0           |
| Respondent or 1 or more parents born outside U.S. <sup>c</sup> (%) | 7.3            |
| Sample size  | 1,241          |

(continued)

## Table 2 (continued)

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

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 1,241 sample members who were randomly assigned between 06/17/2004 and 08/17/2005.

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

Missing values are not included in individual variable distributions.

Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>Respondents who said they are Hispanic and chose a race are included only in the Hispanic category. Respondents who said they are not Hispanic and chose more than one race are only in the multiracial category.

<sup>b</sup>Distributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>c</sup>"Born in U.S." includes Puerto Rico.

five or more years before entering the study. Most sample members (72 percent) reported that they enrolled in college to obtain an associate's degree or to transfer to a four-year college or university. Just under half of the sample (44 percent) had already completed at least one college course at the point of random assignment.

Almost all the study participants at Owens are U.S. citizens and were born in the United States (99 percent and 97 percent, respectively). Very few (6 percent) reported that they regularly speak a language other than English at home. About a third (35 percent) said they were the first in their family to attend college.

### Program Operations

This section, which describes the operations of the Opening Doors program, draws upon information learned during a series of visits to Owens. Between 2004 and 2006, MDRC staff periodically interviewed the Opening Doors staff and administrators, observed meetings between advisers and students, and reviewed the program records of some students. In spring 2005, MDRC conducted a multiday field research visit and interviewed many college administrators, faculty, and staff, including those involved in Opening Doors, to understand how the enhanced program differed from the standard college services that were available to the members of the study's control group. The information from all these visits will be discussed in more depth in a report on the two Ohio Opening Doors programs, scheduled to be published in 2008. The future report will also use results from a survey that was completed by program and control group students to explore the differences in the services they received and their experiences on campus, as well as statistics from a database in which Opening Doors staff recorded key information about their contacts with students (see below for more information on the database).



As noted above, Owens' Opening Doors program was a two-semester intervention. Because a smaller proportion of students attend class during the summer and the term is shorter, Owens and MDRC agreed that the program would operate to its full extent only during the fall and spring semesters. Like at Lorain, Opening Doors students who started the program at Owens in the fall continued through the spring, and students who started in the spring participated in the program the next fall semester. Students in the program group could receive assistance from their Opening Doors adviser during the summer semester, but the services were less intensive: Advisers were available but typically did not reach out to students, as they did during the fall and spring.

The core component of Owens' Opening Doors program was enhanced student services, which were designed to be more intensive, personalized, and comprehensive than those available to other students on campus. Participating students were assigned to an Opening Doors adviser, with whom they were expected to meet regularly for two semesters to discuss academic progress and any issues that might affect their schooling. The Opening Doors staff was led by a full-time program coordinator. For the first year of operations, she was joined by three part-time advisers, and, for the second year, two-part time advisers. The Opening Doors advisers' caseloads varied over time — from a low of about 50 to a high of about 185 — but they always worked with far fewer students than the other advisers at Owens. As is typical in community colleges, Owens' student-to-adviser ratio was more than 1,000 to 1. The Opening Doors team was supported by an administrative assistant and a student worker who helped recruit study participants, schedule appointments with students, and keep program records.

The lower student-to-staff ratio in the Opening Doors program allowed advisers to see students frequently and spend more time with them. This increased contact, program designers posited, would allow the advisers to explore, uncover, and address more issues relevant to the students' success in school. According to the program's design, during each of the two program semesters, students were required to meet with their adviser twice, once shortly before or early in the semester, and then again in the middle of the semester. As discussed below, these meetings triggered the payment of the Opening Doors scholarship. The program designers also intended that the advisers contact students more frequently than just twice a semester (at least once a month). MDRC provided advising guides to the Opening Doors staff to help structure the two required meetings. The guides focused the conversations on anticipating and preventing challenges to completing courses, and on students' short- and long-term goals. At the first meeting, students were given a resource binder, prepared for Opening Doors, which provided information about Owens' academics, financial aid, tutoring, and other campus services, as well as services available in the community.

The Opening Doors advisers provided one-on-one assistance to students and referred them to other staff and departments on campus. The college designated two staff in the financial

aid office as contacts for the Opening Doors students, who were available to provide more individualized attention than was typical. They might help students fill out aid applications and talk to them about anticipating their needs for financial aid in the future or about their classes and how their performance might affect their aid. Opening Doors students also received free one-on-one tutoring at the college's Learning Center. During the last two semesters of the program's operation, Opening Doors asked instructors for feedback on participating students' performance, including attendance information, whether the student was currently passing the class, and whether the instructor recommended tutoring for the student. Advisers used the progress information to help guide their advising.

A few students who participated in Owens' Opening Doors program were interviewed for a Webcast about the study.<sup>26</sup> One student said about the experience:

I have advising anytime I need it. My adviser's...awesome, great. Anything I need, I go to her and she helps me out. Juggling work, full-time student, and two kids — that's pretty hard, very hard to do...If I have a problem in a class...she'll say: go to tutoring if you need it...She's really supportive of everything I'm doing.

Another participant attributed her recent academic success to the program:

Last semester I was a 4.0 student, thanks to the [Opening Doors] program, because of the free tutoring and free advising...It helped me out a lot to set different goals for myself, long term and short term. My short-term goals are, like, within the next two years, to graduate from Owens with a registered nursing degree. By the time I'm 40 — I'm 30 now — I plan on having my master's.

To facilitate the enhanced advising in Opening Doors, Owens created a database to collect key information about participating students and document staff contacts with them. The advisers recorded their in-person contacts with students, including the length of the meeting and the topics covered, and sometimes noted phone calls or e-mail communications. The program's administrative staff recorded students' contact with the financial aid office and tutors at the Learning Center. Some of the advisers kept additional records to facilitate their work, including a spreadsheet that listed key information about each student, and flagged those students who might need extra attention.

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<sup>26</sup>The Webcast was organized by the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education. The Webcast, titled "Serving Adult and Nontraditional Students," and its transcript can be found at <http://www.nccte.org>.

In contrast to students in the program group, students in the study’s control group met with the college’s regular advising staff, as needed. Because the student-to-staff ratio is so high, as noted above, regular advising staff at Owens are not expected to carry caseloads of students or reach out to or follow up with students, and cannot typically meet with students for as much time as Opening Doors staff. Control group students could visit the college’s Learning Center for tutoring, but they typically received assistance in a group. When they needed more individualized help, they could receive one-on-one tutoring, but had to pay a nominal fee (\$1 per hour for a student tutor and \$2 per hour for a professional tutor). This and the other key differences between the Opening Doors program and the college’s regular services are summarized in Table 3.

### **The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 3**

#### **Key Differences Between the Opening Doors Program and Regular College Services at Owens Community College**

| <b>Program Feature</b>    | <b>Opening Doors Program</b>  | <b>Regular College Services</b>  |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Advising and counseling   | Team of advisers, responsible for no more than 185 students each; students assigned to adviser, with whom they were expected to meet regularly; advising was personalized, intensive, and comprehensive; designated contact in financial aid office | One adviser for about every 1,000 students; students not assigned to adviser and met with advisers as needed; advising tended to be short term and focused on academic issues; no designated contact in financial aid office |
| Tutoring                  | Free one-on-one tutoring in the college’s Learning Center   | Group tutoring in the Learning Center; one-on-one tutoring, if deemed necessary, for a nominal fee (\$1 per hour for student tutor, \$2 per hour for professional tutor)   |
| Opening Doors scholarship | \$150 per semester for two semesters, for a total of \$300; payments tied to attendance at mandatory one-on-one advising sessions   | No Opening Doors scholarship   |

SOURCE: MDRC field research data.

Finally, for each of the two program semesters, students in Opening Doors were eligible for a \$150 scholarship that they could use for any purpose, for a total of \$300.<sup>27</sup> Students in the study’s control group did not receive these scholarships. To encourage contact between students

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<sup>27</sup>At Lorain, Opening Doors paid participants \$75 during the first summer of the program (using surplus program funds). Owens did not pay any Opening Doors scholarship money during the summer.

and their Opening Doors adviser, the scholarships were paid out in two installments each semester, after required meetings. The first meeting, which occurred just before or early in the semester, triggered a \$100 payment, and the second meeting, often in the middle of the semester, triggered a \$50 payment.

Among the program group students at Owens, the vast majority (87 percent) attended at least one of the required meetings and received some Opening Doors scholarship money. Only about a third — 36 percent of the program group — received the full \$300. Owens staff reported that students used the money for expenses such as utility bills, automobile insurance and gas, bus passes, child care, and course books. Interviews with some Opening Doors students at Lorain, who received a similar scholarship, suggested that, although the money was certainly appreciated, it did not seem to substantially improve their financial situation.<sup>28</sup>

The Opening Doors program at Owens experienced some staff turnover. The program coordinator left the position just before the first semester of implementation (fall 2004), and a few months later, the senior administrator who oversaw the program was replaced, owing to health problems. Over the program's two-year operation, two advisers left their positions. The college responded quickly, filling most of the positions within weeks. When an adviser left the program during summer 2005, however, the college decided not to replace her. As a result, for the fall 2005 and spring 2006 semesters, Opening Doors had two part-time advisers, rather than three. Caseload sizes peaked that fall. It is important to note that, although the Opening Doors advisers always worked with far fewer students than a typical adviser at Owens, they reported that when their caseloads were larger, it was difficult to keep on top of all their work. They often felt frustrated that they were not doing everything they could for their students.

In sum, it is clear that the Opening Doors program delivered services that were more intensive, comprehensive, and personalized than the college's standard services, and provided additional scholarship monies. Based on MDRC's field research, however, the intensity of the enhanced services varied over time. A conference hosted by MDRC for all the Opening Doors colleges, held in February 2005, seemed to spur enthusiasm for and focus on the program at Owens. The advising in Opening Doors seemed to become more frequent, comprehensive, and intensive that spring, during the program's second semester of operation. It is very possible that the intensity of the program then diminished somewhat during the third semester, when, as noted above, caseloads were larger. Furthermore, the receipt rate for the full Opening Doors scholarship at Owens was somewhat low: As noted above, only 36 percent of the program group received \$300. (In comparison, 61 percent of the program group at Lorain received the full \$300.)<sup>29</sup> A future report on both Opening Doors colleges in Ohio will shed more light on the

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<sup>28</sup>See Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, and Ray (2006).

<sup>29</sup>The Lorain calculation is from Scrivener and Au (2007).

intensity of the implementation of the programs and scholarship receipt rates. The report will examine additional data sources, including the Opening Doors tracking database from each school and the survey that was administered to both program group and control group students. This will yield further information about the nature of the program intervention and the degree of *difference* between Opening Doors and the colleges' regular services.

## **An Early Look at Program Impacts**

This last section presents early impacts on short-term academic outcomes for the full Opening Doors research sample at Owens. These early findings are drawn from transcript data provided to MDRC by the college. The analysis focuses on the 1,241 students who entered the study in the fall 2004, spring 2005, and fall 2005 semesters, and tracks their performance for the first three semesters.<sup>30</sup> Figure 1 presents the alignment of semesters with each respective cohort.

The early results show that the Opening Doors program at Owens had a modest impact on registration rates. Program group students persisted at a higher rate than their peers in the control group between the first and second semesters when services were provided. Similarly, the program group registered for more credits and attempted more courses in the second semester. Once the program ended, however, there were no differences in the registration pattern between program group and control group students. The results presented in this analysis use only student transcript data from the college. In a future report, a more detailed analysis will explore other data sources, including survey data, with which it will be possible to examine other dimensions of students' lives that may have been affected by the program.

### **Expected Results**

As discussed earlier, the Opening Doors program at Owens was a two-semester intervention in which program group students received enhanced advising services and a modest \$150 scholarship per semester. In contrast, students in the control group accessed all the regular advising services offered at Owens, and did not receive the \$150 scholarship.

The enhanced advising was intended to help students better transition into their college experience and provide a forum to discuss and resolve issues related to their college attendance, including academic and financial concerns. The scholarship was designed to provide modest financial assistance to help defray some of the cost of college and alleviate some of the financial

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<sup>30</sup>Complete data, including data on course registration and credits and grades earned, were available only for the first two Opening Doors semesters. For the third semester, or first postprogram semester, outcomes were available only for course registration, as data for the fall 2006 semester were not available when the analysis for this report was carried out.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

### Figure 1

#### Alignment of Opening Doors Semesters with Owens Community College Academic Semesters, by Cohort

|                    | 2004 | 2005   |        |      | 2006   |        |      |
|--------------------|------|--------|--------|------|--------|--------|------|
|                    | Fall | Spring | Summer | Fall | Spring | Summer | Fall |
| Fall 2004 cohort   | OD1  | OD2    |        | PP1  |        |        |      |
| Spring 2005 cohort |      | OD1    |        | OD2  | PP1    |        |      |
| Fall 2005 cohort   |      |        |        | OD1  | OD2    |        | PP1  |

Key: OD1 = First Opening Doors semester; OD2 = Second Opening Doors semester; PP1 = First postprogram semester

NOTE: Program group students who attended the summer semester at Owens Community College did not receive full Opening Doors program benefits. Therefore, summer semesters are not considered program semesters.

burden related to college attendance. It was expected that both elements of the intervention might lead to higher than average gains by students. That is, given the intervention, program group students might be expected to achieve greater success in a number of academic outcomes, including higher semester-to-semester persistence, course attempts and completions, and grade point average.

Given the target group at Owens, it is reasonable to expect some modest improvements in the first semester among program group students and greater momentum in the later semesters, as students learned to navigate the college system with the help of enhanced advising. Since the majority of students randomly assigned into the study were either already enrolled or had expressed great interest in attending the college, no differences in registration rates or the number of courses and credits attempted in the first semester should be expected. However, it might be reasonable to expect differences in completions and/or grade point averages after participating students began receiving enhanced services. In the second semester, students in the program group might start to outperform their counterparts in the control group in more marked ways, specifically in areas of retention, courses attempted and completed, and grade point average. Furthermore, if the enhanced services provided a boost for students, stronger academic progress during the program semesters might continue once the services were no longer available.

## Findings

Table 4 shows the results of the analysis of academic performance during the first three semesters since random assignment for the full research sample at Owens.<sup>31</sup> The second column shows outcomes for the Opening Doors program group, while the third column shows outcomes for the control group. Recall that these latter outcomes represent what would have happened to students in the absence of the program. The last column shows the difference in outcomes between the two groups, which represents the impact of the program. The asterisks show the statistical significance of the differences between the two groups. In other words, the stars indicate whether the difference was a result of the program. The table consists of five panels. Student outcomes are presented in the first three panels, respectively, for the first Opening Doors semester, the second Opening Doors semester, and the first postprogram semester. Summary outcomes for the first three semesters, both including and excluding summer semesters, are presented in the final two panels.

The first panel of the table shows outcomes for the first Opening Doors semester for the full sample. The table shows high registration rates for students in both the program group and control group. As mentioned above, this result was expected, considering that random assignment was conducted for those students who were either already enrolled in the college or showed considerable interest in enrolling. In all measures listed in the first panel, there were no differences between the program group and control group.

The second panel of the table shows outcomes on academic performance for the second Opening Doors semester. Though there is a significant drop for both research groups in registration rates from the previous semester,<sup>32</sup> the 5.6 percentage point difference between the program group and the control group is statistically significant, meaning that the observed increase in persistence for the program group can be attributed with confidence to the program. The table presents statistically significant differences in the number of courses and credits attempted and developmental education credits attained, although the magnitude of these differences is very small. Further, in some other academic outcomes, such as total credits earned and regular credits earned, there are no statistically significant differences between groups.

One interesting outcome shown in the second panel of the table is that significantly more program group students withdrew from courses than control group students. One possible

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<sup>31</sup>Impact estimates are adjusted for the sample members' age and gender; whether they were financially dependent on their parents; whether they had children under 5; and their highest degree, as indicated by baseline data collected just before random assignment. Additionally, because outcomes are presented for the pooled cohorts, the model includes a cohort indicator variable.

<sup>32</sup>This drop in semester-to-semester registration rates is common. See Bloom and Sommo (2005), Brock and Richburg-Hayes (2006), and Scrivener and Au (2007) for similar patterns in retention rates in three other Opening Doors sites.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 4**

**Impacts on Registration and Academic Performance During the First Three Semesters  
Since Random Assignment at Owens Community College**

|   | Program<br>Group | Control<br>Group | Difference<br>(Impact) |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| <b><u>First Opening Doors semester<sup>a</sup></u></b>  |                  |                  |                        |
| Registered for any courses (%)                          | 90.2             | 89.5             | 0.7                    |
| Number of courses attempted                             | 3.3              | 3.2              | 0.1                    |
| Number of courses passed                                | 1.8              | 1.7              | 0.1                    |
| <i>Percent of attempted courses passed</i>              | <i>54.0</i>      | <i>52.8</i>      |                        |
| <i>Passed all courses (%)</i>                           | <i>31.8</i>      | <i>33.1</i>      |                        |
| Total credits registered (regular + developmental)      | 10.5             | 10.3             | 0.3                    |
| Regular credits registered                              | 6.3              | 6.2              | 0.0                    |
| Developmental credits registered                        | 4.1              | 3.9              | 0.2                    |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)          | 5.5              | 5.1              | 0.3                    |
| Regular credits earned                                  | 3.6              | 3.5              | 0.1                    |
| Developmental credits earned                            | 1.9              | 1.7              | 0.2                    |
| Withdrew from 1 or more courses (%)                     | 20.3             | 16.8             | 3.5                    |
| <i>Term GPA</i>   | <i>1.9</i>       | <i>1.9</i>       |                        |
| <b><u>Second Opening Doors semester<sup>b</sup></u></b> |                  |                  |                        |
| Registered for any courses (%)                          | 62.8             | 57.2             | 5.6 **                 |
| Number of courses attempted                             | 2.3              | 2.1              | 0.2 **                 |
| Number of courses passed                                | 1.3              | 1.2              | 0.1                    |
| <i>Percent of attempted courses passed</i>              | <i>56.8</i>      | <i>57.9</i>      |                        |
| <i>Passed all courses (%)</i>                           | <i>34.6</i>      | <i>37.2</i>      |                        |
| Total credits registered (regular + developmental)      | 7.2              | 6.5              | 0.7 **                 |
| Regular credits registered                              | 5.4              | 4.9              | 0.5 *                  |
| Developmental credits registered                        | 1.7              | 1.5              | 0.2                    |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)          | 4.0              | 3.6              | 0.4                    |
| Regular credits earned                                  | 3.3              | 3.1              | 0.3                    |
| Developmental credits earned                            | 0.7              | 0.5              | 0.2 *                  |
| Withdrew from 1 or more courses (%)                     | 15.3             | 11.5             | 3.8 **                 |
| <i>Term GPA</i>   | <i>1.8</i>       | <i>1.9</i>       |                        |
| <b><u>First postprogram semester<sup>c</sup></u></b>    |                  |                  |                        |
| Registered for any courses (%)                          | 40.9             | 37.7             | 3.2                    |
| Number of courses attempted                             | 1.5              | 1.3              | 0.2                    |
| Total credits registered (regular + developmental)      | 4.5              | 4.0              | 0.5                    |
| Regular credits registered                              | 3.9              | 3.5              | 0.3                    |
| Developmental credits registered                        | 0.7              | 0.5              | 0.1                    |

(continued)



**Table 4 (continued)**

|   | Program Group | Control Group | Difference (Impact) |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------------|
| <b><u>Summary outcomes without summer semesters<sup>d</sup></u></b> |               |               |                     |
| Total number of semesters enrolled                                  | 1.9           | 1.8           | 0.1 *               |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)                      | 9.5           | 8.7           | 0.8                 |
| <i>Cumulative GPA since random assignment</i>                       | <i>1.7</i>    | <i>1.6</i>    |                     |
| <b><u>Summary outcomes with summer semesters<sup>e</sup></u></b>    |               |               |                     |
| Total number of semesters enrolled                                  | 2.1           | 2.0           | 0.1                 |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)                      | 10.2          | 9.5           | 0.7                 |
| <i>Cumulative GPA since random assignment</i>                       | <i>1.7</i>    | <i>1.6</i>    |                     |
| Sample size (total = 1,241)   | 622           | 619           |                     |

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from Owens Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 1,241 sample members who were randomly assigned between 06/17/2004 and 08/17/2005.

Because outcomes are presented for the pooled fall 2003, spring 2004, and fall 2004 cohorts, the models include a cohort indicator variable, in addition to indicator variables for: age, gender, financial dependency on parents, has children under 5, and highest degree earned.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between the research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as \*\*\* = 1 percent, \*\* = 5 percent, and \* = 10 percent.

Outcomes that are shown in italics were calculated only for sample members who attempted one or more courses. Differences between program group members and control group members in these outcomes are not true experimental comparisons, and statistical significance tests were not performed.

<sup>a</sup>For the fall 2004 cohort, the first Opening Doors semester is fall 2004. For the spring 2005 cohort, the first Opening Doors semester is spring 2005. For the fall 2005 cohort, the first Opening Doors semester is fall 2005.

<sup>b</sup>For the fall 2004 cohort, the second Opening Doors semester is spring 2005. For the spring 2005 cohort, the second Opening Doors semester is fall 2005. For the fall 2005 cohort, the second Opening Doors semester is spring 2006.

<sup>c</sup>For the fall 2004 cohort, the first postprogram semester is fall 2005. For the spring 2005 cohort, the first postprogram semester is spring 2006. For the fall 2005 cohort, the first postprogram semester is fall 2006.

<sup>d</sup>For the fall 2004 cohort, summary outcomes without summer semesters use data from the fall 2004, spring 2005, and fall 2005 (registration only) semesters. For the spring 2005 cohort, summary outcomes without summer semesters use data from the spring 2005, fall 2005, and spring 2006 (registration only) semesters. For the fall 2005 cohort, summary outcomes without summer semesters use data from the fall 2005, spring 2006, and fall 2006 (registration only) semesters.

<sup>e</sup>For the fall 2004 cohort, summary outcomes with summer semesters use data from the fall 2004, spring 2005, summer 2005, and fall 2005 (registration only) semesters. For the spring 2005 cohort, summary outcomes with summer semester use data from the spring 2005, summer 2005, fall 2005, and spring 2006 (registration only) semesters. For the fall 2005 cohort, summary outcomes with summer semesters use data from the fall 2005, spring 2006, summer 2006, and fall 2006 (registration only) semesters.

explanation is that Opening Doors advisers may have played a role in decreasing unrealistic course loads for some students. Since advising occurred regularly during the program semesters, staff had an opportunity to guide struggling students on how to reduce their course load. However, there is no consequent improvement in some other academic outcomes, such as grade point average. There is a statistically significant increase in the number of developmental credits earned, suggesting that program students' withdrawal from extra courses may have been an important step in helping them pass their developmental education courses. Another possible explanation for the statistically significant impact on withdrawal rates without a corresponding increase in grade point average is that advisers may have counseled a number of students to withdraw from courses that they otherwise might have passed had they continued. These are just two possible explanations for this observed phenomenon; further analysis, which will be presented in a forthcoming report on the Ohio colleges, will explore this issue.

After the services that were provided during the Opening Doors program semesters ended, the positive gains found in the second semester disappeared, as shown in the third panel of Table 4. It is important to remember, however, that the data for this first postprogram semester are incomplete, in that only registration data are available. Nonetheless, there was a sharp decline in persistence for both groups, and the previous positive impacts of the Opening Doors program on registration, courses attempted, and credits attempted disappeared.

The fourth panel of the table shows cumulative outcomes since random assignment for students, excluding data from any summer semesters. As the full set of Opening Doors services were provided only during the fall and spring semesters, the summary outcomes here include only those semesters. It is evident that the Opening Doors program had a modest effect on the number of semesters registered, but no effect on other cumulative measures, including credits earned and cumulative grade point average.

In the final panel of Table 4, to provide a complete picture of students' academic progress since random assignment, the same cumulative outcomes are presented for all semesters since random assignment, including data from summer semesters. Though the number of semesters enrolled and credits earned increase somewhat when the data from the summer semesters are included, there are no differences that distinguish achievement between the program group and the control group.

### **Understanding the Findings**

The Opening Doors program at Owens seems to have had at least a modestly positive effect for students in the program group, though these effects did not seem to endure once the enhanced services were discontinued. The experimental design does not permit the identification of which aspect of the program — the enhanced advising, the scholarship, or a combination of the two — is responsible for these short-term effects. As mentioned earlier, the other site in Ohio, Lorain County Community College, operated a very similar Opening Doors program, in

which enhanced advising services were coupled with a modest scholarship of \$150. A report on that site outlines a similar pattern in the impact on students' academic performance during the first three semesters. The Opening Doors program at Lorain produced some modest impacts in first-to-second-semester retention and in the number of courses and credits attempted, but these effects disappeared once the program ended.<sup>33</sup> It is important to note, however, that the magnitudes of these impacts were nearly double those found at Owens. Also, in contrast to the results at Owens, program group students at Lorain also saw improvements in some select academic outcomes, including credits earned and courses passed.

Further, the early findings from the two Louisiana colleges in Opening Doors strongly suggest that providing substantial financial incentives or assistance can have more lasting positive effects on students' academic performance than is evidenced here.<sup>34</sup> As described in Table 1, the Opening Doors program in the Louisiana colleges provides an interesting contrast to the programs implemented in Owens and Lorain. Rather than emphasizing enhanced advising services and a modest scholarship, the Louisiana program did the opposite. It provided students with a more substantial \$1,000 scholarship per semester for two semesters and modestly enhanced advising services. The payments were contingent upon students' academic performance: Students were required to maintain at least half-time enrollment and a 2.0 (C) grade point average. Though direct comparisons are not possible because the two interventions are programatically different and targeted different populations, the results from the Louisiana study are informative nonetheless. The early evaluation of the Louisiana program suggests that a larger financial assistance package linked to academic performance can lead to positive effects for participants that are larger and endure after the program ends.

As noted earlier, this analysis does not represent a complete and conclusive examination of the Opening Doors program at Owens, but rather provides a first glance at the early effects of the program on academic performance. These results are for a short time period using transcript data, and further follow-up may produce results that suggest improvements for students in the program group in other areas, such as transfer rates. MDRC will continue to follow students in the sample, obtaining additional transcript data provided by the college; data from surveys on reported employment, earnings, social support networks, civic participation, and health outcomes; and transfer information from the National Student Clearinghouse, a database that provides enrollment and degree information at more than 2,800 U.S. colleges. With these additional data, MDRC will provide a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the Opening Doors program at Owens in a future report on both Ohio colleges.

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<sup>33</sup>See Scrivener and Au (2007).

<sup>34</sup>See Brock and Richburg-Hayes (2006). The Opening Doors program in Louisiana targeted low-income parents. As a result, 95 percent and 84 percent of the research samples at the two schools, Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson, were female.



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## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.