



Learning Communities for Students in Developmental English

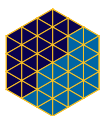
Impact Studies at Merced College and
The Community College of Baltimore County

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FEBRUARY 2012

THE LEARNING
COMMUNITIES
DEMONSTRATION

Executive Summary



National Center for Postsecondary Research
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Overview

Across the United States, community colleges offer millions of students an open-access, low-cost postsecondary education. However, of the students who enroll in community college hoping to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution, only about half achieve their goal within six years. For students who enter college needing developmental (remedial) education in reading, writing, or math, this rate is even lower. Learning communities, in which cohorts of students enroll in two or more linked courses together, are often employed to improve these students' success. In addition to linking courses, learning communities often incorporate other components, such as faculty collaboration, shared assignments and curricula, and connections to student support services.

Merced College in California and The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) each developed learning communities designed to boost the academic success of their developmental English students. These colleges are two of the six in the National Center for Postsecondary Research's (NCPR) Learning Communities Demonstration, in which random assignment evaluations are being used to determine the impacts of learning communities on student success. At Merced, learning communities linked developmental English courses with a variety of other courses at the developmental and college levels. At CCBC, learning communities linked developmental English with a range of college-level courses and a weekly one-hour Master Learner session designed to support curricular integration and student learning. The key findings presented in this report are:

- Both Merced and CCBC implemented relatively advanced learning communities. A strong cohort experience was provided to students, and other aspects of the learning communities model were implemented with variation at each college. On average, the colleges succeeded in providing program group students with an experience that was substantially different from the experience of their control group counterparts.
- At Merced, learning communities students attempted and earned significantly more developmental English credits than students in the control group during the program semester. At the end of the subsequent semester, they had passed significantly more English courses than their control group counterparts.
- At CCBC, there were no meaningful impacts on students' credit attempts or progress in developmental English.
- On average, neither college's learning communities program had an impact on college registration in the postprogram semester, or on cumulative credits earned.

NCPR has now presented findings from all six colleges in the demonstration. They show that when one-semester learning communities have impacts, they tend to be concentrated in the semester in which students are enrolled in the program. The evidence to date suggests that one-semester learning communities programs by themselves are typically not sufficient to boost reenrollment or increase credit accumulation. However, this is not the final report on the demonstration; in 2012, NCPR will release a report that synthesizes the findings across all of the colleges studied and includes an additional semester of student follow-up at each college.

Preface

Community colleges may offer the best opportunity for low-income, minority, and other students to earn a college credential. But achieving this goal is not simple, and many community college students never earn the credits required to receive a certificate or degree or to transfer to a four-year college. In 2006, the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR) was funded by a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, to tackle a critical question for our nation: How do we help students make the transition to college and master the skills needed to advance to a degree?

A keystone of NCPR's research agenda has been a rigorous, random assignment evaluation of learning communities, in which small groups of students take thematically linked classes together in an effort to boost their learning, academic persistence, and long-term success. With the release of this report, findings from all six community colleges in the Learning Communities Demonstration are now available. Merced College and The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), the subjects of this report, implemented semester-long learning communities that linked developmental (or remedial) English courses with a range of other courses.

The impacts of these programs were less impressive than originally hoped or predicted. Across the six colleges, when impacts were observed, they tended to be modest and concentrated in the semester in which the students were enrolled in the program. The most notable impact observed was at Merced College, where learning community students were significantly more likely to take and pass developmental English. But despite this progress in English at Merced, students at neither Merced nor CCBC experienced a measurable boost in reenrollment or an increase in total cumulative credits earned. Likewise, the evidence from other colleges suggests that one-semester learning communities programs by themselves are typically not sufficient to engender long-term academic improvements.

This is not the last word on the demonstration; a final report in 2012 will examine findings across all six colleges (as well as from another previous evaluation) and will offer a cross-site synthesis of the findings with an additional semester of follow-up. In the meantime, it appears that although learning communities may continue to play an important role at community colleges, they alone are unlikely to have a significant impact on students' long-term progress. Rather, broader programs or policies — which may build on or incorporate components from learning communities — may be needed to create new structures or pathways for student success.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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This demonstration would not be possible without the hard work of the students and instructors at Merced College and The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC); we offer thanks first to them all for allowing us to include them in the study.

Numerous individuals supported the project at each college, but we would like to thank a few in particular without whom the study could not have been conducted. These college administrators, faculty, and staff marshaled this project from an “intriguing” idea to a successful evaluation: John Spevak, Anne Newins, Kay Lee, Jennifer McBride, Pamela Huntington, Carol Roscelli, and Luis Flores at Merced College; and Donna McKusick, Mark McColloch, Cheryl Scott, Stephanie Briggs, Nicole Baird, Joy Jones, Terry Hirsch, Lillian Archer, and Dan McConochie at CCBC.

The Learning Communities Demonstration is part of the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR), which is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The project received additional support from funders listed at the front of this report, and we thank them all. NCPR is a collaborative effort of several organizations, including MDRC, the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College, the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University. In addition to being a source of invaluable ongoing advice to and support of the project, Thomas Bailey of the Community College Research Center provided useful reviews and guidance on drafts of this report.

Finally, we are grateful to the large project team who worked alongside the authors and played critical roles on the Learning Communities Demonstration and with the Merced and CCBC sites. Thomas Brock, Rob Ivry, and Mary Visher led the design and management of the overall project and provided insightful reviews of this report. Mary Visher and Emily Schneider assisted with the field research at the colleges. Bethany Miller and Ileri Valenzuela, with the help of Michelle Ware, Paulette Cha, and Christine Sansone, worked with the colleges to implement and monitor the evaluation procedures and to offer assistance to strengthen their programs. Donna Chan processed, fact-checked, and presented the student records data. David Greenberg and Rashida Welbeck designed the cost analysis and collected the cost data from CCBC. Michael Weiss, Jedediah Teres, William Corrin, Timothy Rudd, and Alice Tufel provided thoughtful reviews and advice on drafts of this report. Margaret Bald and Susan Blank edited the report, and David Sobel prepared it for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Across the United States, community colleges offer millions of students an open-access, low-cost postsecondary education. Many students take advantage of the opportunities made available by the community college system, and each year over one-third of the country's postsecondary enrollees attend community colleges.¹ However, of the students who enroll in community college hoping to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution, within six years only about half achieve their goal.² While the rates of degree or certificate attainment are low in general, rates are even lower for the many students who enter college having been assessed as needing developmental education in reading, writing, or math.³

Developmental (remedial) English — encompassing both reading and writing courses — is particularly important for community college students. First, for purely practical reasons, students referred to developmental English typically need to pass these courses to obtain a credential or to transfer to a four-year institution, and many schools require students to complete the courses as a prerequisite to enrolling in college-level English and many other classes. Second, and perhaps more importantly, academically underprepared students may need the skills taught in developmental English to succeed in their other academic pursuits. At the college level, English skills are fundamental to success in all courses, whether reading a biology textbook or writing a research paper in an anthropology course. In addition, many students who enter college having been inadequately prepared in English feel insecure about their abilities and uncomfortable asking their instructors for help.⁴

Learning communities are a strategy that many community colleges use to improve the academic outcomes of students in developmental English and other courses. The most basic learning community model coenrolls a small group of students in two or more classes together. More comprehensive learning communities include additional components such as teacher collaboration, shared curriculum or assignments, or the integration of student supports into the learning community classrooms. The theory of change for learning communities suggests that students will be more engaged in what they are learning and more connected with each other and with their instructors, and as result they will be more likely to master the course material, pass their classes, and stay enrolled from semester to semester.⁵ When learning communities

¹Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder (2009).

²Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, and Shepherd (2010).

³Adelman (2004); Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006); Duke and Strawn (2008).

⁴Chabot College (2007).

⁵See Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider (2008) and Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) for a review of the literature. Also see Tinto (1997); Engstrom and Tinto (2008); and Malnarich (2003).

include advanced levels of curricular integration, it is further anticipated that students will better understand the material of one linked course in the context of the other. This contextual learning, in turn, may allow students to make deeper connections between content areas and to understand how their courses are relevant to other areas of their lives.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

The Learning Communities Demonstration is a national research project that is testing the effectiveness of learning communities in six community colleges across the United States: Merced College, in California; The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), in Baltimore, Maryland; Hillsborough Community College in Tampa, Florida; Houston Community College in Houston, Texas; Queensborough Community College in Queens, New York; and Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. This report describes the findings from the programs at Merced and CCBC, which each offered learning communities for students in developmental English (including both developmental reading and developmental writing) with the goals articulated above in mind. Findings from the studies at the other four colleges can be found in previously published reports from the Learning Communities Demonstration.⁶ This project is being conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR), which MDRC, in partnership with the Community College Research Center (CCRC), the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University, established through a grant (R305A060010) from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Several foundations provided additional support to the Learning Communities Demonstration.⁷

The study at all six colleges was designed to describe the implementation and operation of the learning communities and to determine whether the programs succeeded in boosting their students' academic success. The study used an experimental design in which students who were interested in and eligible for the courses included in the learning community were randomly assigned to either a program group, whose members were strongly encouraged to participate in the learning communities, or to a control group, whose members could not participate in learning communities but were allowed to enroll in any other classes and received the college's standard services. By comparing outcomes for program and control group students, the study was able to gauge the "impact" — or net value added — of the program on key student outcomes. The primary outcome measures included passing of targeted courses, college reenrollment, and total credit accumulation. The learning communities studied in the demonstration

⁶Visher, Schneider, Wathington, and Collado (2010) details the early implementation experiences of the six colleges in the demonstration. The other impact studies from the demonstration can be found in Weiss, Visher, and Wathington (2010); Weissman et al. (2011); and Visher and Teres (2011).

⁷The following foundations generously supported this project: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Robin Hood Foundation.

lasted for one semester per cohort at each college, and transcript data were collected on students in both the program and control groups for the program semester and one or more subsequent semesters. In this report, student outcomes at Merced and CCBC are analyzed for the program semester and one subsequent semester.

At Merced College, most of the learning communities linked developmental writing either with another course at the developmental level (reading or math), with a student success course designed to prepare students for the demands of college, or with a college-level content course in a subject such as health, criminology, or music. At CCBC, developmental reading or writing was linked with a college-level content course such as health or psychology. Furthermore, CCBC's learning communities included a Master Learner session that provided students an extra hour of classroom instruction each week to support their work in the learning community courses. These program models are depicted in Figure ES.1.

Key Findings from Merced and CCBC

- Merced and CCBC had relatively ambitious goals for the implementation of advanced, semester-long, developmental English learning communities. In practice, a strong cohort experience was provided to students, and other aspects of the learning communities model were implemented with variation among the different links at each college. Overall, the colleges succeeded in providing the majority of program group students with an experience that was substantially different from that of their control group counterparts.

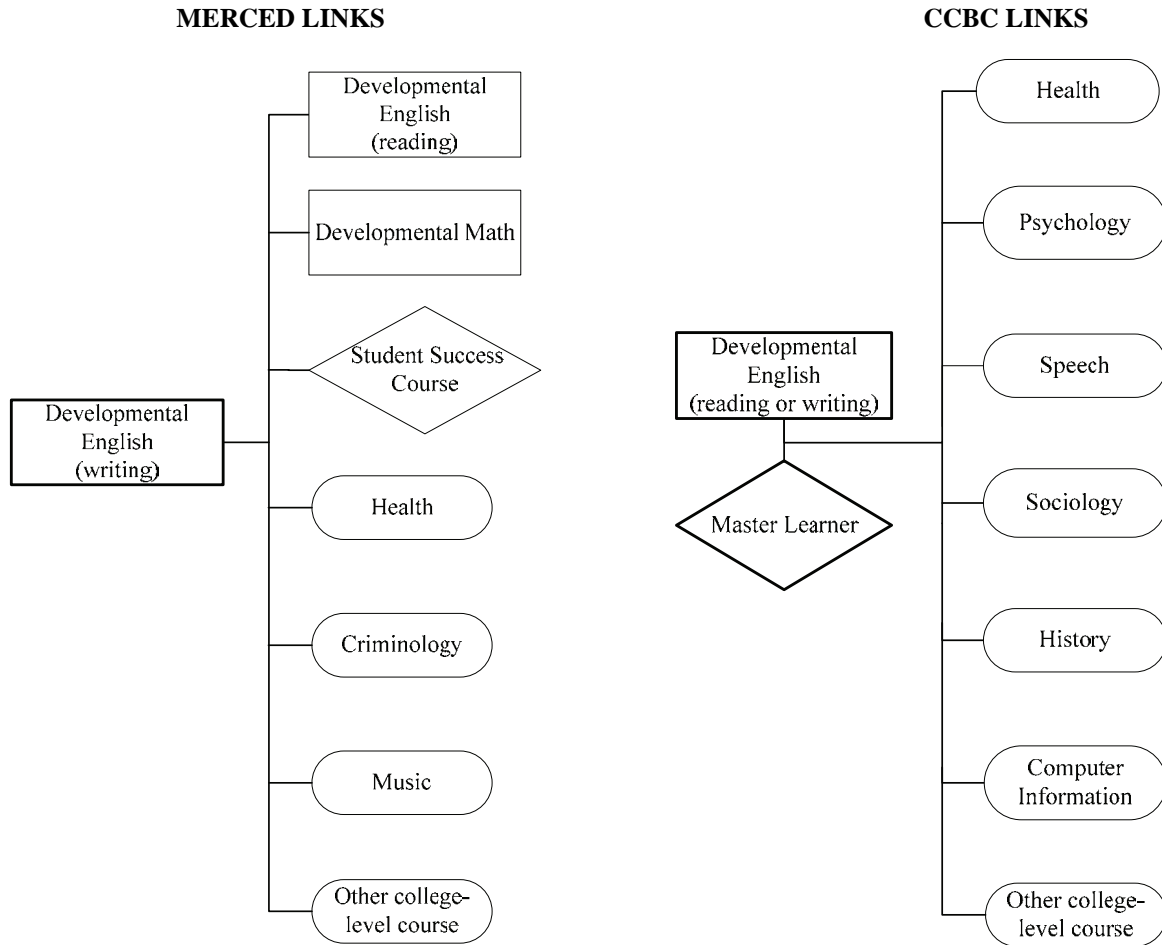
Merced's learning communities linked developmental English with a variety of other courses at the developmental and college levels. These learning communities included generally high levels of faculty team collaboration, with the expectation that this would facilitate high levels of cross-course content integration. In practice, this integration varied among the different links, tending to be most advanced in the learning communities where the faculty team members had more experience working together.

CCBC's learning communities linked developmental English with a college-level course and a weekly one-hour Master Learner session. The Master Learner session was not required but was offered as an opportunity for students in the learning community to meet together with an instructor who could provide them with additional help developing their study skills. Further, the Master Learner was intended to help students make connections between the content in each of the linked courses in the learning community. Apart from the Master Learner, CCBC's program did not initially include a strong emphasis on cross-course content integration, but over time the program's leaders sought to increase the level of curricular integration. However, the program's expansion during the course of the study, combined with new expectations and support for program implementation, led to significant variation in the implementation

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure ES.1

The Learning Community Model at Merced College and CCBC Learning Communities for Students in Developmental English



NOTE: “Developmental English” includes both developmental reading and developmental writing courses. Components on the left of each diagram were linked with a course in one of the subjects on the right. At Merced, developmental writing was linked with a course in one of the subjects depicted on the right, with the exception of one learning community in spring 2009 that linked developmental reading with a student success course. At CCBC, there were roughly equal numbers of developmental reading and developmental writing links throughout the demonstration.

quality of the learning communities. The Master Learner sessions were particularly difficult to implement consistently.

Because of this inconsistency and their relatively high cost, CCBC discontinued this component after the demonstration ended.

- At Merced, learning communities students attempted and earned significantly more developmental English credits than students in the control group during the program semester. At the end of the subsequent semester, they had passed significantly more English courses than their control group counterparts.

At Merced, fewer than half the students in the control group attempted developmental English in the program semester; in contrast, about 60 percent of students randomly assigned to the program group took a developmental English course. Among these students who took developmental English in each group, the pass rates were very similar (about 81 percent). Thus, because students in the learning communities program group were significantly more likely to attempt developmental English, they also earned significantly more developmental English credits than their control group counterparts, putting them further ahead in the English sequence toward college-level courses.

In the subsequent semester, there were no significant differences in the credits that students in the program and control groups attempted or earned. However, cumulatively — at the end of the postprogram semester — students in the program group were still ahead of their control group counterparts and had passed an average of about one-third of a course more in the English sequence.

- At CCBC, there were no meaningful impacts on students' credit attempts or progress in developmental English.

At CCBC, developmental English courses are mandatory for all students who test into them. As a result, about 80 percent of control group students enrolled in a developmental English course in the program semester, leaving little margin for improvement on this measure. About the same proportion of students in the learning communities group as in the control group enrolled in developmental English. Students in both groups passed their developmental English courses at similar rates, and there was thus no significant difference in the number of English credits earned in the program semester or the postprogram semester. In summary, the learning communities program at CCBC had no impact on students' progress through the developmental English course sequence.

- On average, neither college's learning communities program had an impact on college registration in the postprogram semester, or on cumulative credits earned.

In addition to accelerated progress through the developmental English sequence (as observed at Merced), the learning communities' theory of change suggests that participation would lead to higher rates of reenrollment in college and credit accumulation — both necessary steps on the path toward earning a degree or credential or transferring to a four-year institution. However, contrary to the theory of change, learning communities students at Merced and CCBC were no more likely than their control group counterparts to stay in college in the postprogram semester. Furthermore, at neither college did learning communities have a significant impact on the total number of credits earned (English plus other credits) by students in the two semesters of the study.⁸

Conclusions and Looking Ahead

Some insight into the question of why the CCBC and Merced programs were found to have different impacts may be found in the differing policies at those institutions. At CCBC, students were required to take developmental courses if they tested into them and may not have been able to enroll in other courses until they did so. This was not the case at Merced, where the testing placement was a recommendation only, and many students delayed taking developmental courses. This may explain why the impact seen in the developmental English credits attempted at Merced did not occur at CCBC, where such courses were required for all students.

More broadly, this report adds to the body of rigorous research on learning communities; NCPR has now presented findings from all six of the colleges in the Learning Communities Demonstration. These findings, viewed together with findings from an earlier random assignment study of developmental English learning communities at Kingsborough Community College,⁹ show that when one-semester learning communities have impacts, they tend to be modest and concentrated in the semester in which the program group students are enrolled in the learning communities. The evidence suggests that one-semester learning communities programs by themselves are typically not sufficient to boost reenrollment or lead to lasting increases in credit accumulation.

⁸Merced's positive and statistically significant impact on developmental English credits earned did not translate into a significant impact on cumulative credits earned, because the increase was partially offset by small (and statistically insignificant) decreases in the number of both regular and other developmental credits earned.

⁹Scrivener et al. (2008).

However, there may still be a role for learning communities to play as possible catalysts for, or components of, institutional change and improvement. Learning communities may also be a part of broader programs or policies that seek to create structured and supported pathways for students throughout their college tenure.

This is not the final report on the demonstration, and there is still more to be learned about the promise and limitations of learning communities at community colleges. In 2012, NCPR will release a final report that synthesizes the demonstration's findings and lessons across all of the colleges studied. It will also include an analysis of one additional semester of student follow-up at each of the six colleges. With this cross-site perspective, NCPR will examine the learning communities theory of change alongside the impact estimates from the study. This analysis will seek to better understand how the theory of change does or does not align with the programs' measured impacts on progress in developmental education, reenrollment, and overall credit accumulation.

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