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

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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 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2009). 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 (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010). 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 (Adelman, 2004; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Duke & Strawn, 2008).

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 (Chabot College, 2007).

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. When learning communities 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.

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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 (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & 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, & Wathington, 2010; Weissman et al., 2011; Visher & Teres, 2011).

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 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.

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 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.

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 (Scrivener et al., 2008), 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.

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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