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The Experience of  
Six Community Colleges

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MARCH 2010

THE LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES  
DEMONSTRATION

Executive Summary



National Center for Postsecondary Research  
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**The Experience of Six Community Colleges**

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## Overview

Community college leaders are using many strategies to improve their students' ability to complete their studies, particularly their academically underprepared students. In recent years, these strategies have included adaptations of an approach long used in four-year colleges known as "learning communities," in which groups of students enroll together in two or more courses. Learning communities often feature thematically linked courses and offer an integrated curriculum that helps students to see connections between disciplines. Increasingly, colleges use learning communities to help academically underprepared students progress more quickly toward successful completion of their studies by linking a developmental course with a college-level course. Proponents of learning communities believe that linking courses in this way helps students get to know each other better or more quickly, enables them to see connections between disciplines, encourages them to engage more deeply with learning, and fosters stronger relationships with faculty. These experiences are expected to engage students and to ultimately improve their academic outcomes, including passing courses, persisting to the following semester, and earning a degree or certificate.

The Learning Communities Demonstration is a large-scale, random assignment evaluation of learning communities programs at six community colleges. During the first year of the demonstration, all six colleges expanded their learning communities programs and, in the process, faced similar challenges in selecting courses to link, recruiting and supporting faculty, filling the learning communities with eligible students, and helping faculty use instructional strategies such as curricular integration to enhance learning. By spring 2009, the colleges operated more than 130 learning communities serving around 3,000 students. This report describes the strategies the colleges used to scale up their programs while working to improve their quality, and the many complex challenges that are likely to be faced by any community college intent on scaling up effective learning communities — including scheduling, faculty engagement with and approach to teaching, and balancing developmental courses with traditional college-level courses. Key findings from the implementation study include:

- **A paid coordinator and committed leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.**
- **As coordinators clarified expectations and offered support, faculty responded by changing their teaching practices.**
- **Curricular integration remained difficult to implement widely and deeply.**
- **Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.**



## Foreword

Learning communities are not new. Their origin springs from the Experimental College established at the University of Wisconsin in 1927 by Alexander Meiklejohn. Responding, in part, to what he saw as the division of the curriculum into increasingly smaller units housed in specialized academic structures that separated students from the curriculum and the faculty, Meiklejohn developed an interdisciplinary, team-taught, two-year lower division curriculum that emphasized active learning and the integration of ideas from different fields of study and disciplines. Though short-lived, it established a way of thinking about the structure of the curriculum and students' relationship to it that set in motion the development of learning communities as we know them today.

The learning community initiatives that followed in the 1960s, such as those at Fairhaven College within Western Washington University, the Centennial Program at the University of Nebraska, and the University of California, Berkeley, though no longer active, served to lay the foundation for the learning community movement of the 1980s and beyond. Today, learning communities are found in a wide range of institutions — urban and rural, residential and commuter. Though many have been established in four-year colleges and universities, an increasing number have also been developed in community colleges. DeAnza College, Delta College, Kingsborough Community College, LaGuardia Community College, and Seattle Central Community College, among scores of others, have adapted learning communities to serve the particular needs of their students, many of whom begin college academically underprepared. They have done so, for instance, by including one or more developmental course in the set of courses that are included in the curriculum of the learning community. It is argued that by doing so students are better able to acquire needed basic skills when they have to apply them to the material in the linked courses.

Whether for students who require basic skills or for college-ready students who intend to transfer to a four-year institution, the success of learning communities depends not just on the formation of student cohorts through co-registration, but on the construction of shared learning environments that actively involve students in learning in ways that lead them to integrate the material of the linked courses that make up the learning community. Doing so requires that faculty work together to coordinate their separate courses and employ “pedagogies of engagement” (for example, cooperative or problem-based learning) that actively involve students in learning with others. More than anything else, faculty provide the key to successful learning communities — their collaboration and training the primary challenges that have to be met for learning communities to become fully effective.

This report is the first of several that will be released as part of the national Learning Communities Demonstration. A longitudinal study of learning communities at six community colleges, it is the first large-scale study to employ random assignment of students to gauge the impact of learning communities on student academic achievement in different institutional settings. With the sole exception of MDRC's evaluation of learning communities for students in developmental English at Kingsborough Community College as part of the Opening Doors demonstration, no prior study has employed this rigorous method to test for learning community impact. Though my own multi-method studies of learning communities, most recently with my colleague Catherine Engstrom, provide a detailed picture of their association with a range of outcomes in different college settings, final determination of their impact on academic outcomes, independent of student self-selection, awaits the results from this important study.

The findings reported here focus on the early implementation stage of the development of learning communities in the six colleges studied. It details the many challenges that institutions face in fully implementing learning communities, challenges that take time to meet. As is characteristically the case in the early stages of program implementation, there tends to be significant variation within colleges in the degree to which learning communities are completely established. It simply takes time to put in place the structures, incentives, and staff development programs that enable faculty to construct the sorts of learning environments that are the key to effective learning communities. In providing details of how six community colleges are moving to meet the challenges of implementing learning communities, this report provides a much-needed guide to other colleges as they consider developing or scaling up learning communities on their campuses.

Vincent Tinto  
Syracuse University



## Preface

With nearly half of all U.S. undergraduates attending community colleges, it is not surprising that the Obama administration's call for increasing the proportion of college graduates by 2020 is centered on these institutions. Community colleges offer educational opportunities to most of the nation's undergraduates who are first-generation, low-income, minority, and nontraditional students, yet retention and completion rates remain distressingly low. More than 40 percent of incoming community college freshmen are underprepared and must enroll in at least one remedial (or developmental) reading, writing, or mathematics course. And less than 30 percent of them will earn a certificate or degree within eight years. This situation must change if the nation is to achieve its goals in a competitive, global economy.

Learning communities — which are proliferating across college campuses and hold some promise for helping developmental-level students succeed — may be one way to make that happen. Learning communities are small groups of students who take thematically linked classes together in order to enhance their engagement with school, increase their understanding of interdisciplinary connections, and strengthen their cognitive skills. In some cases, developmental-level courses are linked with college-level courses, providing a useful context for the developmental-level work and allowing students to earn college credit immediately. This report describes the Learning Communities Demonstration, an ambitious initiative taking place at six community colleges that are testing different models of learning communities and scaling up their programs. MDRC is evaluating those programs as part of its participation in the National Center for Postsecondary Research, a partnership funded by the federal Institute of Education Sciences that also includes the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University.

As Vincent Tinto, one of the nation's foremost experts on learning communities, notes in his foreword to this report, the Learning Communities Demonstration is the first large-scale random assignment study of this intervention. It builds on the promising results of MDRC's earlier study at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, which found that students in learning communities moved more quickly through developmental English requirements, took and passed more courses, and earned more credits in their first semester than other students.

But while the Kingsborough study focused on program impacts, this report considers what it takes to build a strong learning communities program. Despite their growing popularity, learning community programs are not easy to implement and sustain and, for that reason, they often remain modest in scope at most community colleges. The six colleges described here learned valuable lessons about the inherent challenges in scaling up a learning communities program so that, instead of reaching a small number of students and involving just a few faculty

members, they can reach hundreds of students and enlist the participation of dozens of faculty members. Their experiences demonstrate that it is possible to meet those challenges, although not without some growing pains. It is our hope that this report will be helpful to other colleges that are looking to launch and start up their own programs. We also look forward to sharing the results on the effects of these learning communities on student achievement over the next two years.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President, MDRC

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While it is impossible to name all the individuals who supported the project in these ways, we would like to single out the program coordinators and a few others at each college who were primarily responsible for building up their learning community programs, recruiting and supporting instructors, recruiting and enrolling students, and maintaining random assignment procedures for as long as two years: Donna McKusick, Lillian Archer, Cheryl Scott, Maureen O'Brien, Joy Jones, Nicole Baird, and Denise Richardson at The Community College of Baltimore County; Judy Alicea and Craig Johnson at Hillsborough Community College; Chyrell Botts, Beverly Hixon, Elaine Krieg, Patricia Ugwu, Patrick Nguyen, Lois Avery, and Maria Straus at Houston Community College; Rachel Singer, Peter Cohen, and Debra Sisco at Kingsborough Community College; Kay Lee, Jennifer McBride, Carol Roscelli, Anne Newins, and John Spevak at Merced College; and Susan Madera, Michele Cuomo, and Brian Kerr at Queensborough Community College.

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The Authors

## Executive Summary

Community colleges are on a quest for answers to the urgent question of what they can do to help more students achieve their education and career goals. College leaders are trying new strategies in the face of alarmingly low persistence and completion rates, particularly among their academically underprepared students. In recent years, a popular response has been to enroll groups of students together in two or more courses, which are often linked thematically and share assignments. This course structure is called a “learning community.”

Proponents of learning communities believe that linking courses in this way helps students get to know each other better and more quickly, which can lead to the development of social and academic support networks. The link, or “integrated curriculum,” may also help students understand connections between disciplines and, in so doing, help them to both engage more deeply with learning and enhance their cognitive skills. Linking a developmental-level course and a college-level course, a popular approach, can additionally help students earn college credit immediately and give them a useful context for their developmental-level work. Finally, learning communities can provide a structure in which faculty can get to know students on a deeper level and keep tabs on their progress. These experiences are expected to improve academic outcomes such as course passing rates, persistence to the following semester (that is, reenrolling each semester), and earning a degree or certificate.

Little rigorous research has been done on the effect of learning communities on academic outcomes, particularly for students at the developmental level — that is, students who are not academically prepared to take college-level courses. Two exceptions are Tinto’s evaluation of learning communities in 13 community colleges and MDRC’s evaluation of learning communities for students in developmental English at Kingsborough Community College, as part of the Opening Doors demonstration (a multisite study that tested interventions at six community colleges designed to help low-income students stay in school and succeed).<sup>1</sup> The encouraging results from these studies paved the way for the Learning Communities Demonstration, a nationwide, large-scale random assignment evaluation of learning communities, funded primarily by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the National Center for Postsecondary Research, and supplemented with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford

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<sup>1</sup>Cathy McHugh Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, “Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students,” *Opportunity Matters* 1 (2008): 5-21; Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo, *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2008).

Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Robin Hood Foundation.

Six community colleges across the country are participating in the Learning Communities Demonstration:

- The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC)  
(Baltimore, Maryland)
- Hillsborough Community College (Tampa, Florida)
- Houston Community College (Houston, Texas)
- Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, New York)
- Merced College (Merced, California)
- Queensborough Community College (Queens, New York)

At each college, around 1,000 students who were interested in enrolling in learning communities volunteered to be in the study. About half were randomly assigned to the program group and half to a control group. Program group members could enroll in a learning community that fit their schedule and course needs; control group members were allowed to enroll in any course for which they were eligible or that was required, but could not enroll in a learning community. (Random assignment creates two groups that are similar both in characteristics that can be measured, like age or academic attainment, and in those that cannot be reliably measured, like motivation. This approach ensures that any difference in observed outcomes between the two groups of students — called *impacts* — can be attributed with confidence to the learning community experience.) Study intake began in fall 2007 and was completed in fall 2009.

As data become available, future reports will share findings on the impact of learning communities on academic outcomes. While these impact findings will be invaluable for informing the debate on how to improve student success rates in community colleges, college leaders and staff also need practical answers to the “how to” questions of learning communities: how to expand the program from a handful of learning communities serving a few dozen students to dozens of learning communities serving hundreds, how to motivate and support faculty, how to decide which courses to link together, how to make learning communities work for academically underprepared students, and how to deliver an integrated curriculum in the community college setting.

The six colleges in this study tackled all of these questions while participating in the Learning Communities Demonstration. Their experiences, which are the subject of this report, offer rich examples and many solutions to the real-world challenges likely to be faced by any

community college intent on designing, operating, and scaling up effective learning communities. The key findings are:

- A paid coordinator and committed college leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.
- As coordinators clarified expectations and offered support, faculty responded by changing their teaching practices.
- Curricular integration remained difficult to implement widely and deeply.
- Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.

## **Implementation of the Learning Community Programs**

The colleges in the study varied in the amount of experience they had with learning communities, ranging from a college that had run only a handful of learning communities taught by a few passionate instructors, to a college where learning communities had been fully institutionalized and served a substantial percentage of all incoming freshmen. To make it possible to rigorously evaluate these programs, leaders at each college had to be willing to scale up their program to offer six or more learning communities each semester, where each learning community in the program shared at least one common course, or “anchor” course.

A primary question for the demonstration is whether learning communities improve academic outcomes for students who enter community college with low basic skills. Therefore, the learning communities at CCBC, Hillsborough, and Merced each included a developmental English or reading course, and at Houston and Queensborough, each learning community included a developmental math course. Each of these “anchor” courses was linked with one of the following: another developmental course, a college-level course (usually the introductory course for an academic subject), or a “student success course” (designed to teach study skills and other strategies for succeeding in college). Kingsborough’s program was an exception, in that it was designed only for continuing students in specific majors, and the anchor course was an “integrative seminar” that taught college success strategies appropriate for students who had passed through their developmental requirements and chosen a major. Beyond this, colleges adapted or strengthened their learning communities programs by, for example, adding enhanced student services or actively promoting integrative teaching practices (that is, curricular integration, or instructive strategies that connect the content of the linked courses).

Each learning communities program evolved over the course of the demonstration as colleges responded to the challenges of scaling up while maintaining or improving the quality of

their programs. Program coordinators worked hard to schedule the links, recruit and train new faculty to teach in the learning communities, coordinate between student services and academic affairs to schedule the learning community classes and promote the courses to students, and support faculty such that they collaborated with their teaching partner to integrate the linked courses. About a year into the demonstration, a series of focus groups and interviews was conducted at each college in order to document the implementation of the program up to that point. In addition, course syllabi from learning communities were collected and analyzed, and faculty who taught in the learning communities were surveyed. These data taken together tell the story of the extent to which the programs were implemented as designed, as well as how they grew and evolved throughout the first year of their participation in the demonstration.

## **Key Findings on Implementing the Three Core Elements of a Learning Communities Program**

The findings in this report highlight the strategies that the six participating colleges used and the lessons they learned in the first year of the demonstration, with a focus on three core elements: how to design and manage a large learning communities program, how to train and support faculty to take full advantage of the structure of learning communities to improve teaching and learning, and how to incorporate extra support for students into the learning communities.

### **Designing and Managing Learning Communities**

Although all of the colleges had operated learning community programs before the study began, new administrative structures were required for the demonstration because, in every case, the colleges expanded their programs. Running six or more learning communities per semester, taught by as many as a dozen or more instructors, while enrolling several hundred students, requires significant management and administrative support. The six colleges faced similar challenges attracting both faculty and students to the learning communities, but with time were able to achieve their goals and overcome many early obstacles.

- **A paid coordinator and committed college leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.**

Each site received a grant to support a coordinator position to oversee all project activities. The coordinator played an indispensable role and initiated a variety of activities, including recruiting faculty, organizing faculty development events, working with registration staff to enroll students in the learning communities, and assuming a host of other responsibilities. In addition to the important role of coordinators, clear and visible commitment from top leaders at the colleges can “make or break” an effort to scale up learning communities. For example, at



CCBC, learning communities became a primary strategy in the college's five-year plan to improve student achievement and retention, demonstrating the administration's support, which bolstered buy-in across faculty and student services staff. Strong examples of visionary leaders of learning communities were not always present at the outset of the demonstration. But over time, all six colleges experienced the support of champions at a high level in the college — support without which they would not likely have succeeded in implementing and scaling up their programs.

- **Recruiting and supporting enough motivated faculty were ongoing challenges at most colleges.**

Most of the colleges in the demonstration had operated only a few learning communities of the kind needed for the study prior to the demonstration. As a result, they had to scale up rather quickly as the demonstration got under way, doubling or sometimes tripling the number of learning communities they offered. To do so meant that they had to recruit faculty who might not otherwise have volunteered to teach in a learning community. Coordinators learned to use many strategies to motivate and support faculty, including offering incentives such as stipends or access to training, clearly communicating expectations about what it meant to teach in a learning community, and providing ongoing support to help instructors collaborate and integrate their courses. As a result of the program's long history, Kingsborough had a particularly well-developed strategy for recruiting, training, and supporting faculty. Administrators across departments approached faculty who they felt would do well in learning communities, who were then presented with detailed documentation of the expectations and supports for teaching in a learning community. Faculty who chose to get involved then went through a six-week training module with their teaching partner to plan their learning community. Faculty received compensation for participating in the training module and for each semester of teaching.

- **Choosing which courses to link together was initially difficult, but leaders soon learned how to strategically select courses that both met student needs and attracted enough students to fill the learning communities.**

Colleges that are expanding and strengthening learning communities need to make sure not only that there are trained and enthusiastic faculty to teach the new linked courses, but also that there are enough students to fill them. The colleges in the demonstration became much more adept at this as time went on. Program coordinators learned to choose links strategically to maximize enrollment, by analyzing past trends in enrollment patterns and considering factors such as the time of day when classes are taught and student course preferences. For example, at Queensborough, the learning communities originally linked two developmental-level courses. Students enrolled at a lower rate than expected, so program administrators reworked the offerings to link the developmental math course with a college-level course. The opportunity to im-

mediately earn college credit while simultaneously eliminating a developmental course requirement was much more popular among students, and there was little trouble filling the learning communities from that point on. Across the colleges, program coordinators also learned that marketing learning communities to appeal to students helped them meet their enrollment goals.

### **Teaching and Learning in Learning Communities**

Proponents of the learning community model consider three components to be key agents of change in the classroom setting: faculty collaboration, integrative teaching practices, and pedagogy that promotes active, collaborative learning. The faculty members who teach in learning communities work in teams as “teaching partners” to create curricular connections between their courses. Such faculty collaboration is necessary for teaching partners to coordinate their courses and teaching practices, and to communicate with one another about their shared students. Courses are coordinated through integrative teaching practices — or curricular integration — when the course material is tied together by a learning community theme, aligned readings, joint assignments, and other strategies, in order to encourage students to see connections between the courses. Finally, teaching practices that emphasize active, collaborative learning — that is, teaching that pushes students to engage more actively with the material and with each other in intellectual discourse — are also thought to be a critical component of effective learning communities.

The extent to which teaching and learning changed at the six colleges depended in large part on the degree to which these three components were emphasized, the college’s efforts at training and supporting faculty, and the faculty’s response to training opportunities, while at the same time coping with the challenges of scaling up the program.

- **As coordinators became clearer and more specific about their expectations for collaboration, and as they put into place the support and training needed, many faculty responded positively to the challenges of changing their teaching practices.**

Faculty members with less experience teaching in learning communities were particularly responsive to the coaching and training that were offered. As coordinators began to feel more comfortable with clarifying and communicating expectations, faculty pairs met with each other more often to plan their learning communities, and there was a corresponding increase in practices such as developing themes for learning communities to emphasize interdisciplinary connections and assigning work that asked students to draw on those connections. This pattern was evident throughout the colleges but was particularly strong at Hillsborough. By the third semester of the demonstration, the coordinator was strongly encouraging faculty to adopt themes for their learning communities and develop assignments and projects that fit with these themes, such as censorship and immigration.

- **While many learning communities featured instructional strategies to engage and motivate students, curricular integration proved to be very difficult to implement widely and deeply.**

By the end of the first year of the demonstration, all six colleges had made an effort to bring more integrative practices into the classrooms of their learning communities — including those that did not initially emphasize this component in their programs. However, the use of these practices still varied widely, both within and across the colleges. Curricular integration proved to be very demanding and challenging to implement, especially when faculty were not adequately informed of or trained in these techniques. While at least one or two faculty pairs at each college managed to offer an integrated curriculum, on the whole most learning communities featured only superficial or sporadic attempts to help students see interdisciplinary connections. Students often didn't notice these efforts, and when they did their reactions were mixed.

### **Supporting Students in Learning Communities**

By co-enrolling a cohort of 20 to 25 students in the same classes together, learning communities can create connections that will support students as they pursue their academic goals: connections with their fellow students, connections with faculty, and connections to the support services that are available on campus. These connections can lead to a heightened sense of engagement with and belonging on campus, which may in turn lead to stronger academic and personal support, and better academic outcomes.

Students can develop strong relationships when they take linked classes together as a group, as they see each other and work together regularly in multiple classes. Strong relationships between students and faculty occur when faculty work to be more accessible to their students and to be aware of any issues that students may be facing, through extra outreach, sitting in on their teaching partner's class, and communicating regularly with their teaching partner about the students in the cohort. Finally, students are connected to resources that are available on campus when support services are integrated into the learning community. This can happen when, for example, a student success course is included in the link, or by tying services into the classroom through a dedicated tutor or counselor, or through presentations made by service specialists on campus.

For the six colleges in the study, the success of the learning communities in creating connections for students stood out as a consistent and powerful theme.

- **Student cohorts in learning communities led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.**

The experiences of the colleges in the demonstration show that student cohorts supported the development of strong personal and academic support networks among students, which increased their sense of community and willingness to ask for help. Across the colleges, students typically described seeing and working with the same people in multiple classes as their favorite aspect of the learning community. Students in learning communities reported that they felt more comfortable and more supported than they did in their stand-alone classes. This was particularly the case at Houston, where students spoke about the friends they had made in their cohort and the fact that they felt more comfortable asking each other for help because they knew each other well. Faculty members at Houston and across the colleges also observed that their learning community students supported each other, that they formed networks more quickly, and, in many cases, that the cohort increased accountability and seemed to improve attendance and even academic performance among their students.

- **The strongest connection to student support services seemed to occur when the support was integrated closely with the learning community, through a student success course or tied-in services.**

Linking with a student success course was a popular approach for connecting students to support services. Systematically implemented, tied-in services, such as outreach from program coordinators or tutoring, also supported the students in the learning communities. For example, Merced offered a learning community that linked developmental English with a student success course, and several others had supplemental instructors to assist students both inside and outside the classroom. These learning communities gave students additional tools to help them with their studies and navigating college life. Such programs require coordination and communication between the instructional and student services divisions in the colleges during the planning and implementation of learning communities.

## **Summary**

Though the learning communities in each college's program were consistent with respect to the "anchor" course and student cohorts, significant variation across learning communities within the same college was observed, particularly in the level of curricular integration. In fact, the variation in instructional strategies seemed at least as great within colleges as across colleges. This variation was primarily a result of the faculty's varied levels of experience teaching in learning communities, and inconsistency on the part of program leaders to initially specify clear expectations about the program and hold faculty accountable for meeting those expectations.

However, as coordinators became clearer and more specific about their expectations for collaboration and integration, more faculty development took place, leading to more collabora-

tion among pairs. As new faculty gained more experience, many faculty members began to experiment with intentional integration such as assigning joint projects to their students. This is consistent with the view that learning community programs tend to go through certain “developmental” phases themselves, with the use of innovative instruction that takes full advantage of the learning community structure often taking time to reach its full potential.

## **Looking Ahead to the Impact Findings**

Over the next year, a series of reports will be released that will include findings from the impact evaluation and updates from the implementation research. The implementation research reported here suggests that despite some improvement over time, one component of learning communities — curricular integration — was not consistently or fully implemented in all of the learning communities. Given the relatively low level of integration, and the variation across and within sites, it seems unlikely that any impacts would be the result of this particular instructional approach. Instead, it is more likely that impacts would derive from the stronger social relationships of students in learning communities, and the way that those relationships may have led to deeper engagement with and commitment to education among the students.

While the Learning Communities Demonstration was not designed to sort out which of the key components of learning communities are the mechanisms underlying any impacts, or which ones matter the most, it is expected to shed light on whether and how much learning communities as a whole can affect student outcomes. Combined with the results of the implementation research reported here, the impact findings stand to significantly advance what is known about what works to improve the success of community college students.

