LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, is often held up as a national model for learning communities. Kingsborough first offered learning communities in 1995 with its Intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) Program, which links five courses thematically, including ESL, speech, a “content” course such as history or biology, and two student development courses focused on helping students transition to college and to conduct career and life planning. Students take the linked courses together as a cohort. The instructors for the five courses coordinate and integrate their syllabi and assignments, including assigning joint projects, and then meet regularly throughout the semester to discuss issues faced by their students. The instructors of the student development courses also serve as case managers for the students, helping to support and advise the students and to enhance the linkages between the courses in the learning communities.

A study compared the performance of 385 students who started their studies in the Intensive ESL Program between 1995 and 2000 with another 385 students who did not start in the program. That study found that students in the Program consistently outperformed their peers on a number of factors, including having higher:

- Passage rates for first semester ESL courses;
- Grades in subsequent ESL or developmental English courses;
- Overall GPA;
- Passage rates on ACT reading and writing tests; and
- Graduation rates.

Kingsborough also offers a learning community program that is structured around participation in a research study called Opening Doors, conducted by MDRC, a nonprofit education and social policy research organization. MDRC’s study focuses on low-income, full-time freshmen at Kingsborough between the ages of 17 and 25. For Opening Doors, the students take three courses “together as a block” with about 25 students. One of the courses is a student development course, covering topics such as study skills; a second course is English (most typically at the developmental level); and the third course is in another academic subject. Like the Intensive ESL Program, the instructors for the three courses coordinate and integrate their syllabi and assignments and meet regularly, and the instructor for the student development course also serves as a case manager. Participating students also have access to tutors and receive vouchers to

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A comparison group was established of students who do not participate in learning community courses, and do not have the dedicated counseling, tutoring, or vouchers enjoyed by the learning community group.

An early analysis of transcript data from the project’s first semester (fall 2003) suggests that students in the learning communities “substantially outperformed” students in the control group. Students in the learning communities had higher passage rates, especially in English, than the control group in their first semester (63 percent of learning community students passed all of their classes, compared to only 40 percent in the control group). Students in the learning communities were also more likely to complete their developmental education requirements in English within one year of initial enrollment than their counterparts (33 percent compared to 14 percent). Transcript data did not, however, reveal any increases in persistence.

MDRC recently conducted interviews to further the research. MDRC is careful to caution that their sample size was too small to be conclusive. However, their findings “suggest that learning communities can improve academic outcomes and social ties to some extent among younger, full-time students.” More specific findings included that students in the learning community praised their faculty and felt their faculty cared about them. They also received more “personal attention” from their professors while completing coursework than those in the control group. The students also reported that the dedicated counseling served as an “early warning system,” helping them to monitor their performance, which MDRC posits may have engaged students more and improved retention.

Learning communities are considered a key part of the culture at Kingsborough, as evidenced by the fact that information on learning communities is a Web link off of the Kingsborough Community College home page. The college intends to expand its learning communities to reach 80 percent of incoming freshmen by the year 2010.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

www.mdrc.org/project_31_2.html
www.kingsborough.edu/faculty/learning_communities/learning_communities.htm

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