

**Building Learning Communities**  
**Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration**  
**at Kingsborough Community College**

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# Overview

A postsecondary credential is becoming a prerequisite for admission to the American middle class. Community colleges, with their open admissions, convenient locations, and relatively modest cost, serve as the gateway to postsecondary education for many low-income and disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, many students enter community college with low basic skills and leave before earning a credential.

In the Opening Doors project, MDRC and its research partners are working with six community colleges to test special programs designed to increase student persistence and achievement and, in the longer term, labor market success. Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York — a fairly large college with a diverse student population that includes many immigrants — is testing a program called Opening Doors Learning Communities. The program has served about 750 students. It targets freshmen, most of whom failed one or more of the reading, writing, and math skills tests that all incoming students must take.

Kingsborough's Opening Doors Learning Communities program places participating freshmen into groups that consist of up to 25 students each. Each group forms a learning community, a cohort that takes three first-semester courses together: English (usually at the remedial level), a course on another academic subject, and a one-credit freshman-orientation course. The instructors, including a counselor who teaches the freshman orientation course, work as a team to integrate the courses (for example, by giving joint assignments), meeting regularly during the semester to review student progress and to devise success strategies for students having problems. Each learning community's counselor works with students to address any obstacles to regular attendance and academic success. Students in the learning communities also receive extra tutoring and a voucher to purchase books.

Kingsborough freshmen who agree to participate in the Opening Doors study are assigned, through a lottery-like process, to the learning communities program or to a control group that takes regular unlinked courses and is eligible for standard counseling and tutoring. Opening Doors is the first evaluation of a community college program to use this rigorous research design. Analysis of transcripts for the first group of students to enter the study in fall 2003 show that:

- **Opening Doors students substantially outperformed control group students during their first semester at Kingsborough**, achieving higher course pass rates, particularly in English.
- **One year after enrollment, Opening Doors students were more likely to have completed their remedial English requirements.** Among students who had failed both the reading and writing skills tests prior to enrollment, 33 percent of Opening Doors students had retaken and passed both tests one year later, compared to just 14 percent of control group students. Surprisingly, however, Opening Doors students were no more likely than control group students to be enrolled at Kingsborough (or elsewhere in the City University of New York) one year later.

These early results are not the final word on the Kingsborough program. They include only about one-fourth of the students in the study and primarily reflect the experiences of students who participated in the learning communities program during its start-up semester. Future reports will include results for a larger group of students over a longer follow-up period.



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## Preface

The thirty-mile waterfront that traces an outline of Brooklyn, New York, has provided Brooklynites with jobs and resources for at least 300 years. In the last century, another dimension of opportunity was added to the shore line: education. In 1963, property at the southern tip of Brooklyn — which had once served as a beach resort and once as a military post — was converted into a community college, and the area’s workers, immigrants, parents, and other potential “nontraditional” students found that they had an accessible option for obtaining something that the world increasingly demanded from them: a higher-education degree.

The college that provided this new opportunity was Kingsborough Community College. Today, Kingsborough operates on a big scale, offering, among other things, a wide array of associate’s degree programs, English-as-a-Second-Language courses, a public high school, and a child care center. It serves more than 30,000 students each year and employs more than 800 people. In a major urban borough — the largest and most populous borough of New York City — such an institution is vital, and all the more so because of its relatively low cost and open enrollment plan.

But Kingsborough, like all community colleges, faces a sobering statistic: about 45 percent of students who begin postsecondary studies at community colleges in the U.S. do not complete a degree or enroll elsewhere within six years. Moreover, a large percentage of entering community college students are not prepared for college-level work and must take remedial courses. Aiming to improve student persistence and academic success on its own campus, Kingsborough joined MDRC’s Opening Doors Demonstration.

Opening Doors is a nationwide project that is testing different approaches to enhancing instruction, student services, and financial aid at community colleges. MDRC is conducting a multiyear study of the Opening Doors programs at six colleges to build stronger evidence on how to improve persistence and graduation rates. At Kingsborough, the program revolves around learning communities. Up to 25 students in their first semester form a cohort, together taking three “linked classes” — courses in different subjects (including English) that are closely integrated in terms of scheduling and content. They also receive enhanced tutoring, extra counseling and support, and vouchers to purchase books.

This report reveals — through both an examination of quantitative impacts and profiles of six students who enrolled in Opening Doors at Kingsborough — that early evidence of the program’s effects is encouraging: Students in the program are more likely to take and pass critical developmental courses than other students. It is too early to know for sure whether the hopeful signs will be sustained and will lead to lasting change, but the study is ongoing, and follow-up at Kingsborough and on other campuses will shed further light on the questions. For the na-

tion's 1,200 community colleges — and for the millions of students they serve — success here could provide a beacon as they strive to improve student graduation rates.

Robert J. Ivry  
Senior Vice President  
Development and External Affairs

## Acknowledgments

The Opening Doors demonstration is supported by a number of foundations and government agencies, which are listed at the front of this report. We are grateful for their generous and steadfast support.

We are also grateful to the many administrators, faculty, and staff who have contributed to the success of Opening Doors at Kingsborough. They took a leap into the unknown when they agreed to participate in this unusual project, and they have been wonderful hosts and partners over the past two years. There is not enough space to mention everyone who has played a role in the program and in the study, but we particularly want to acknowledge the following individuals: Former President Byron McClenney made the initial decision to join the Opening Doors project, and his strong support helped get the program up and running under tremendous time pressure. Acting President Fred Malamet continued to support the project during his tenure. Current President Regina Peruggi has become a champion of Opening Doors and is working to sustain and expand the program in the future. The unstinting support and assistance of Provost Stuart Suss and Dean Norman Toback has been vital to the project's success since its inception.

Rachel Singer, Director of Academic Affairs, and Peter Cohen, Director of the Freshman Year Experience, have been the heart and soul of Opening Doors. Their dedication, energy, and good humor are infectious and inspirational.

The Opening Doors faculty have shown talent and commitment. We cannot mention them all by name, but Marcia Babbitt, Rebecca Arliss, Kate Garretson, and Barbara Walters deserve special recognition for their leadership. The Opening Doors coordinators, Barbara Fairweather and Susan Richards, and the case managers, Nora Bitá and Zuleika Rodriguez, have made the program run day to day, and have contributed to the research in more ways than we can describe.

Dean Richard Fox and his staff have skillfully assembled student transcript records for the analysis, and Dean Loretta DiLorenzo has also made valuable contributions on many occasions. Cindy Ho, Katherine Wu, Sally Ricottone, and Jeanine Graziano-King also deserve special thanks.

Finally, we wish to express our thanks to the hundreds of students who have participated in the research and, in particular, to the students who have answered surveys or participated in interviews or panel discussions. Their stories remind us of the reasons why Opening Doors is such an important initiative.

We also wish to thank the other researchers who have collaborated with MDRC on the Opening Doors project — in particular, the members of the MacArthur Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood and the MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health.

Many MDRC staff have contributed to the Opening Doors project and to this report. Rob Ivry’s strategic vision has guided the Opening Doors project since it began, and Tom Brock has ably directed the project’s research activities. Sue Scrivener and Melissa Wavelet have played central roles in the project and in the start-up of the Kingsborough site. All of these individuals, along with LaShawn Richburg-Hayes and Cecilia Rouse (Princeton University), reviewed drafts of this report and provided helpful comments. Johanna Walter worked closely with Kingsborough’s institutional research staff to obtain transcript data. Reishma Seupersad and Vanessa Martin were the day-to-day liaisons with Kingsborough during the study period. The study could not be completed without their hard work. Joel Gordon, Galina Farberova, and Shirley James and her staff developed and monitored the random assignment and baseline data collection process. Jenny Au helped with programming and table production, Damali Campbell provided production assistance, Amy Rosenberg edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared the report for publication.

The Authors

## Why Worry About Community Colleges?

A postsecondary credential is fast becoming a prerequisite for admission to the American middle class. Nearly 40 percent of families headed by a worker with only a high school diploma have an income that is too low to meet their basic needs — compared with less than 8 percent of families headed by a college graduate.<sup>1</sup> One study by the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that people who obtain a bachelor's degree will, over the course of a lifetime, earn nearly \$1 million more than people with only a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup>

It wasn't always this way. As recently as the 1970s, the U.S. economy was producing relatively well-paying jobs for workers without a college education. In fact, at that time, the difference in earnings between high school graduates and college graduates had declined to the point that a respected economist wrote a book questioning whether it still made economic sense to attend college.<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter, for reasons that are still disputed, the employment opportunities and wages of workers without a college education began to stagnate or even decline. Between 1979 and 2000, real (inflation-adjusted) hourly wages rose by a modest 21 percent for college graduates but *dropped* by 3 percent for workers with only a high school diploma.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps in response to these economic trends, college attendance has become the norm for high school graduates. As shown in Figure 1, in 1964, only about 25 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds had completed at least one year of college. By 2002, this figure had grown to 58 percent.<sup>5</sup> Fully three-fourths of 1992 high school graduates had enrolled in college by 1994.<sup>6</sup>

As college attendance has become more common, the profile of the typical college student has changed beyond recognition. Today, just one out of four undergraduates nationwide is a “traditional” student, meaning that just one out of four enrolled in college immediately after high school, attends school full-time, works part time or not at all, and is financially dependent

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<sup>1</sup>Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen, and Bernstein, 2001, p. 7. The figures are for families with earnings, one or two parents, and one to three children under age 12. The authors calculated a “basic family budget” — defined as “the income a family requires to afford basic needs for a safe and decent standard of living” — for different areas of the country. The figures cited in the text are very similar to the percentages of families with income of less than twice the federal poverty level.

<sup>2</sup>Cheeseman Day and Newburger, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Freeman, 1976.

<sup>4</sup>The stagnation or decline in wages for workers without a college education has been much more pronounced for men than for women. See Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey, 2003.

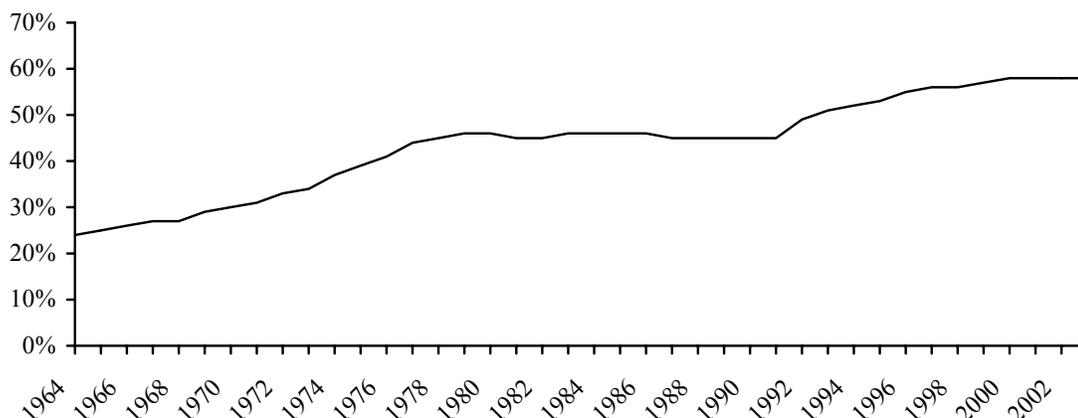
<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Education and Social Stratification Branch, 2003.

<sup>6</sup>Choy, 2002.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure 1

### 25- to 34-Year-Olds in the United States Who Have Completed at Least One Year of College



SOURCE: United States Census data.

and unmarried without children. Only 10 percent of undergraduates have all of these characteristics of “traditional” students and also attend a four-year college and reside on campus.<sup>7</sup>

Nowhere is this shift more evident than at the nation’s nearly 1,200 community colleges. With their open-access policies, relatively modest cost, and convenient locations, community colleges serve as the gateway to postsecondary education for millions of low-income and minority students, working parents, students who need remedial instruction, and other nontraditional college students. Today, about half of first-year undergraduates attend a community college.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, while college attendance is now quite widespread, college *completion* is much less common, particularly for community college students. Figure 2 shows the status in 2001 of students who entered a public two-year college in 1995-96 with the goal of earning a degree or certificate. Six years after starting school, fewer than 40 percent of the students had earned a credential (an additional 17 percent were still enrolled in a postsecondary program).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Wolanin, 2003.

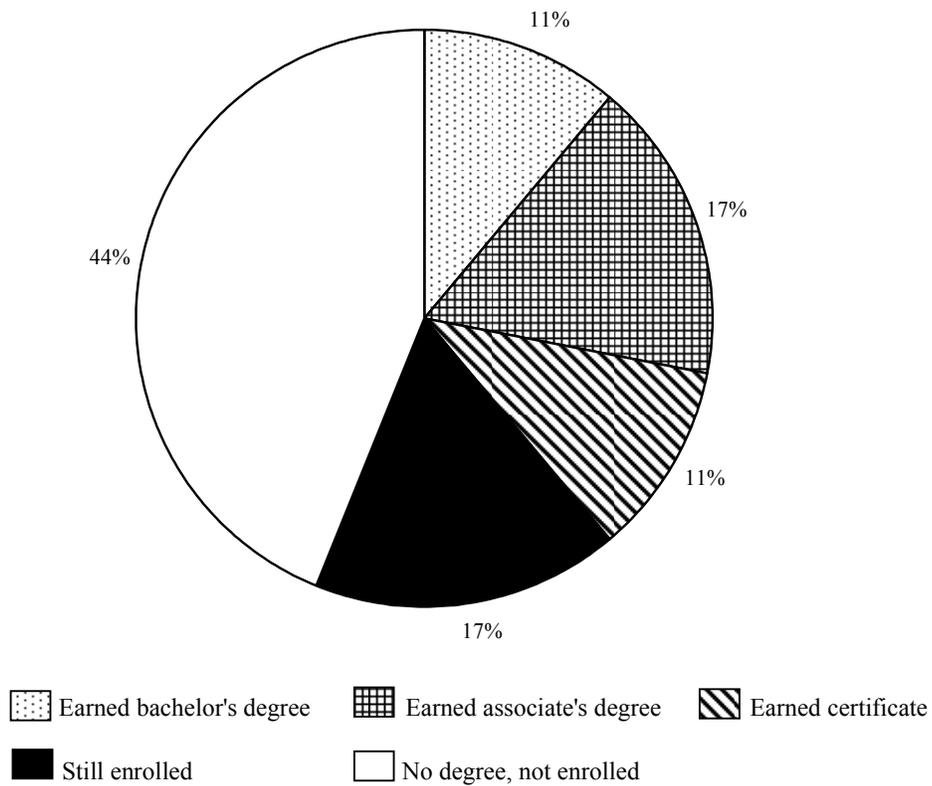
<sup>8</sup>Wolanin, 2003.

<sup>9</sup>American Council on Education, 2003.

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure 2

Status in 2001 of Students Who Entered Public Two-Year Colleges in the United States in 1995-1996



SOURCE: American Council on Education Center for Policy Analysis, *Student Success: Understanding Graduation and Persistence Rates* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2003.)

Completion rates are particularly low for students who start with developmental (remedial) courses — half or more of new students at many community colleges.<sup>10</sup>

While studies suggest that any postsecondary education is associated with better labor market outcomes, by far the largest rewards go to those who obtain a degree (and, in particular, a bachelor's degree).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, recent analysis of demographic and economic trends suggests that the U.S. economy will experience a severe shortage of skilled workers in the coming decades. This “skills gap” threatens to stifle economic growth and generate an even larger disparity in earnings between workers with postsecondary education and workers without postsecondary education.<sup>12</sup> In short, finding ways to increase the rates of persistence and completion (and/or transfer) among community college students — particularly those who start in developmental courses — may be critical to maintaining America's tradition of upward mobility and economic opportunity.

In the Opening Doors demonstration, MDRC, a nonprofit education and social policy research organization, is working with six forward-thinking community colleges to test strategies designed to promote persistence and academic success for low-income students. The strategies involve curricular reforms, expanded support services for students, and financial aid enhancements. Opening Doors is distinctive because it appears to be the first study to use a random assignment research design to assess how specific programmatic innovations affect academic success and, in the longer term, labor market and personal development outcomes for community college students. Random assignment, the same method used to test new medicines, is generally considered the most reliable method for evaluating many kinds of employment, training, and education programs.<sup>13</sup> The Opening Doors demonstration is funded by 12 private foundations and 3 federal agencies.<sup>14</sup> In addition to MDRC, the evaluation team includes members of the

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<sup>10</sup>Nationally, 42 percent of freshmen at public two-year colleges took at least one remedial reading, writing, or math course in 2000, but the rates are much higher at many urban community colleges. See Parsad, Lewis, and Greene, 2003; Jenkins and Boswell, 2002.

<sup>11</sup>It appears that vocational associate's degrees may also have a large economic payoff. One study found that males with a vocational associate's degree earn 30 percent more than similar students with only a high school degree. The disparity is even larger — about 47 percent — for females. (See Silverberg, Warner, Fong, and Goodwin, 2004.)

<sup>12</sup>The Aspen Institute, 2003.

<sup>13</sup>See Brock and LeBlanc, 2005, for further information on the Opening Doors project, the research design, and the participating colleges.

<sup>14</sup>The funders are the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, George Gund Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Joyce Foundation, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health, MacArthur Foundation Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R01 HD046162), Princeton University Industrial Relations Section, Robin Hood Foundation, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Labor, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and William T. Grant Foundation.

MacArthur Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood and the MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health.

This report focuses on one of the colleges participating in Opening Doors, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. The first college to join the Opening Doors demonstration, Kingsborough is working with MDRC and its research partners to test an innovative program called Opening Doors Learning Communities that targets first-semester freshmen. Opening Doors began operating at Kingsborough in fall 2003 and has served more than 700 students since that time. The New York City-based Robin Hood Foundation is supporting the Opening Doors Learning Communities program.

The next section introduces Kingsborough Community College, and subsequent sections describe the Opening Doors Learning Communities program, profile the participating students, and discuss some of the issues and challenges involved in operating the program. The final section takes a very early look at the program's effects on students' academic performance, focusing on the first cohort of enrollees. Later reports will examine the effects of Opening Doors for a larger group of Kingsborough students, over a longer follow-up period.



## CUNY by the Sea

Two things are likely to strike any first-time visitor to Kingsborough Community College. The first is the attractiveness of the campus. Green spaces stand out in a borough with more than 35,000 people per square mile. Kingsborough's 72 acres, full of grassy knolls, 1970s-style architecture, and outdoor sculpture — sitting at the edge of a neighborhood of spacious single-family homes — would fit neatly in many suburbs. Add to that the beach. A developer of resort hotels might pay good money for the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows that line the walls of the college's main cafeteria (indeed, as described below, one once did). Gentle waves lap onto Kingsborough's small private beach as sailboats float lazily past. It's hardly the gritty Brooklyn landscape typically presented in movies and books and on television.

The second striking thing about Kingsborough is the students. Former Mayor David Dinkins liked to refer to New York City as a “gorgeous mosaic.” To some, the phrase seemed hopelessly naïve in the early 1990s, when racial and religious conflicts were tearing the city (and Brooklyn in particular) apart. Still, in 2004, it is hard to resist Dinkins' idealistic sentiment after witnessing the boisterous, colorful swirl of skin tones, accents, and clothing styles crowding the Kingsborough hallways between classes.

The official statistics show that Kingsborough's student body more or less mirrors the demographics of Brooklyn. About 41 percent of Kingsborough students are white, 33 percent black, 15 percent Latino, and 11 percent Asian.<sup>15</sup> But these broad categories don't begin to tell the story. A detailed look at demographic data provided to MDRC by the 21 Kingsborough freshmen in a single remedial English class illustrates both the diversity of Kingsborough's students and the complex and changing patterns of immigration to Brooklyn:

- The five students who identified themselves as “Hispanic” included an immigrant from Ecuador and four U.S.-born students: one with a Puerto Rican father and a Yugoslavian mother, one with a Puerto Rican mother and an Australian father, one with a parent born in Ecuador, and one with a Chinese-born father and U.S.-born Hispanic mother (this student identified himself as both “Asian” and “Hispanic”).
- The eight students who identified themselves as “black” included students born in Haiti, Jamaica, St. Vincent, Nigeria, and Canada, along with three U.S.-born students (two with Caribbean-born parents).

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<sup>15</sup>According to the 2000 census, Brooklyn's population is about 35 percent white (non-Hispanic), 34 percent black (non-Hispanic), 20 percent Hispanic (of any race), and 8 percent Asian.

- The five students who identified themselves as “white” included immigrants from Russia and Ukraine and three U.S.-born students.
- The four students who identified themselves as Asian included two immigrants from China and one from Bangladesh, along with the Asian/Hispanic student mentioned earlier (who is counted in both categories).

One might expect a low-level remedial English class to contain a large number of immigrants, but the same is true of many classes at Kingsborough. The college reports that its students come from 110 countries and speak 68 languages — and that the college ranks among the top 3 percent of community colleges nationally in the number of degrees awarded to minority students.<sup>16</sup>

## A Brief History

Community colleges began to emerge in the early 20th century and experienced several periods of rapid growth. By 1950, there were about 250 community colleges nationwide and, by 1970, there were 650. New York State bucked the national trend for a while — there were no community colleges established in the state until 1950 — apparently because private colleges persuaded the state not to fund institutions that were perceived as competitors. But it didn’t take New York long to catch up: By 1970, there were 45 community colleges in the state.<sup>17</sup>

Kingsborough was one of several community colleges established in New York City during this period of rapid expansion. In 1961, the first four of the community colleges, along with four senior colleges, became part of the then new City University of New York (CUNY), now the nation’s largest urban university. Kingsborough was established and incorporated into CUNY shortly thereafter, in 1963, and it began holding classes at its current campus in 1966.

The decision to locate Kingsborough in Manhattan Beach, at the southern tip of Brooklyn, generated controversy at the time. Manhattan Beach had been a tony resort in the late 19th century, built by developer Austin Corbin to compete with Newport, Rhode Island. Two massive luxury hotels, an opera house, a zoo, and a 10,000-seat theatre stood near the current site of the Kingsborough campus. Even after the hotels closed in the early 20th century, the nearby Rainbow Bandshell hosted performances by Danny Kaye, Xavier Cugat, Rudy Vallee, Milton Berle, and others in the years before World War II. The land was then acquired by the federal government, which used it as a Coast Guard training center during the war, and later as an air force facility.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>See Kingsborough’s website: [www.kbcc.cuny.edu](http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu).

<sup>17</sup>Dougherty, 1994.

<sup>18</sup>Merlis, Rosenzweig, and Miller, 1997; Ierardi, 1975.

When city officials proposed to obtain the land from the federal government to house the new college, community groups from the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood argued that the site would be inaccessible to residents of primarily black and Puerto Rican areas.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in a city where fewer than half of households own a car, the Kingsborough campus is nearly 1.5 miles from the nearest subway stop (but can be reached by bus). Many Brooklyn students travel for one to two hours, via multiple subway and bus lines, to reach the campus. (Ironically, in the 1880s, when Manhattan Beach was an exclusive resort, a train line ran directly to the luxury hotels. Wealthy Manhattanites could board a ferry to Brooklyn, transfer to the train, and arrive at the resort in under one hour.<sup>20</sup>)

Eventually, a compromise was reached: the main campus would be located at Manhattan Beach, and a second facility would be placed in downtown Brooklyn (the downtown location lasted only a few years). Early Kingsborough classes met in old buildings from the military installation. By the 1970s, construction began on the current campus buildings.

## **Kingsborough Today**

Kingsborough has grown in many directions over the years and, like many community colleges, it now operates an extremely diverse set of educational programs. The college offers a wide array of associate's degree programs — including both career-oriented programs like accounting and graphic design and traditional liberal arts and science programs — all open to anyone with a high school diploma or a General Education Development (GED) certificate.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Kingsborough operates dozens of occupational training programs, English-as-a-Second-Language courses, a public high school, a child care center, and a college program for senior citizens, among other kinds of programs. Kingsborough serves more than 30,000 students each year, more than half in credit programs. It has more than 800 staff and an annual operating budget of nearly \$60 million.

As in many community colleges, there is a clear distinction between the Office of Continuing Education, which operates certificate training programs, customized training for businesses, preparation for the GED certificate exam, personal development courses, and other non-credit programs, and the academic side of the college, which operates the Associate's Degree programs. However, the distinction between “credit” and “noncredit” programs is complicated

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<sup>19</sup>Bennett, 1964.

<sup>20</sup>Snyder-Grenier, 1996.

<sup>21</sup>Kingsborough offers three associate's degrees: Associate in Arts (AA), Associate in Science (AS), and Associate in Applied Science (AAS). The AA and AS programs are designed to facilitate transfer to four-year colleges, while the AAS programs — focusing on specific occupations — are geared toward students who want to go to work in their field immediately after completing the degree.

## Box 1

### Developmental Education at CUNY

In 1998, the CUNY Board of Trustees, with the strong support of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, voted to eliminate developmental classes from the University's four-year colleges. Once this policy took effect, students who failed any of the three skills assessment tests that are administered prior to enrollment (in reading, writing, and math) were directed to a community college for developmental coursework. The change generated great controversy. Critics, citing data showing that students who begin at community colleges are less likely to complete bachelor's degrees than comparable students who begin at four-year colleges, argued that the change would ultimately reduce the number of poor and minority students who obtained bachelor's degrees.\*

Although all incoming freshmen at Kingsborough have earned a high school diploma or GED, only 18 percent passed all three of the skills tests in 2003 — a rate that is typical for many urban community colleges. Students who fail the tests are not required to take developmental courses when they start school, but students in all of Kingsborough's associate's degree programs must complete any required developmental English courses, plus two credit-bearing English courses that are only open to students who have passed both the reading and writing skills tests. Similarly, students cannot transfer to a CUNY four-year college until they have passed all three of the skills tests. In general, students who fail the skills tests before enrollment can retake the tests only after they have passed specific developmental courses. Developmental courses do not earn any college credit, although each such course is assigned "equated credits" to account for the hours spent in class (for example, a developmental English course that meets for eight hours a week is worth eight equated credits). Equated credits count in determining whether a student is attending school full time.

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\*See, for example, Lavin and Weininger, 1999.

by the fact that many students in the degree programs take noncredit developmental (remedial) English and math courses because they fail one or more of the skills assessment tests that are administered to all students who enter the CUNY system (see Box 1). In fall 2004, more than 1,000 of the roughly 1,900 freshmen took at least one developmental course. Opening Doors is housed in the academic division of the college and, as discussed below, most of the participating students take a developmental English course.

Although in many ways a typical community college, Kingsborough is unusual in some respects. For example, the student body is younger than that of many other colleges (nearly three-fourths of Kingsborough students are under age 25), and an unusually large fraction of

students (about half) attend full time. In addition, community colleges in New York State are among the most expensive in the nation:<sup>22</sup> Full-time Kingsborough students pay more than \$3,000 per year in tuition and fees. At the same time, New York has an unusually generous state-funded financial aid program, the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which provided more than \$800 million in grants to nearly 400,000 students in 2003. Nearly 70 percent of Kingsborough students receive some form of federal or state aid.

Kingsborough also has an unusual academic calendar. Each semester is divided into two modules: a 12-week session (fall or spring) and a supplemental 6-week session (winter or summer). Students can complete courses during the 12-week session and then return to take additional courses during the 6-week session for no additional cost (courses typically meet for twice as many hours each week during the 6-week sessions).

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<sup>22</sup>American Association of Community Colleges, 2003.



## Opening Doors at Kingsborough

Students drop out of college — or “stop out” (that is, leave and return) — for many reasons. Some do it because they cannot afford tuition, or because they experience personal or family problems, others because they cannot handle the work, and still others because their goals change. At the community college level, of course, many students leave because they transfer to four-year schools. In recent years, research on student persistence has increasingly focused on the importance of “involvement,” particularly during a student’s first year at college. Vincent Tinto, a leading researcher in this area, wrote, “simply put, the more students are involved in the social and academic life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn and persist.”<sup>23</sup>

Students in community colleges like Kingsborough may have a particularly difficult time making the initial connections that make persistence more likely. Kingsborough students do not have the opportunity to bond with other students in dormitories. Most Kingsborough students work or have family obligations and leave the campus as soon as their classes end each day. The fact that many students must travel for one to two hours each way further reduces opportunities for social interaction.

On the academic side, most Kingsborough students fail one or more of the CUNY skills tests and are steered toward developmental English or math courses that earn no academic credit and that may seem unrelated to the students’ academic or career interests. It is easy to see why many students — particularly those whose test results place them in low-level developmental courses — become frustrated and leave school before completing their developmental requirements. Other students procrastinate, choosing not to take developmental courses at first, but they may have difficulty handling their work. Finally, many Kingsborough students are wrestling with personal and financial challenges that draw time and energy away from their school work.

### Learning Communities: A Promising Strategy

Learning communities, which are a key element in Kingsborough’s Opening Doors program, are seen by many as a promising strategy to promote student involvement — with faculty, with their peers, and with the subject matter they are studying. A key monograph on learning communities offers the following definition: “any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses — or actually restructure the material entirely — so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they

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<sup>23</sup>Tinto, 1998.

are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.”<sup>24</sup>

A recent study identifies four common approaches to structuring learning communities:<sup>25</sup>

- **Paired or clustered courses.** Under this model, two or more individually-taught courses are linked, meaning that 20 to 30 students take the courses together as a cohort, and, often, that faculty redesign the curricula for the separate courses, frequently around a unifying theme. Also, the courses are block-scheduled, so that they meet one after the other.
- **Cohorts in large courses.** In this model, a small group of students — usually freshmen within a large lecture course — forms a learning community. This group of students meets separately for discussion sessions, writing courses, or weekly seminars.
- **Team-taught programs.** In this model, two or more courses are combined around a theme. An entire cohort — made up of as many as 75 students — sometimes meets as a group with all of the faculty and sometimes meets in smaller discussion groups.
- **Residence-based programs.** In residential colleges, students enrolled in linked courses may also live together in a designated residence hall.

The roots of the learning-community approach can be traced back as far the 1930s, to an experimental program at the University of Wisconsin that redesigned the first two years of college around an interdisciplinary study of democracy in ancient Athens and modern-day America.<sup>26</sup> The learning-community models that are more familiar today, such as those described above, began to spring up in the 1970s, and the approach is now quite widespread in postsecondary education.<sup>27</sup> In 2002, the National Survey of First-Year Academic Practices found that 62 percent of responding colleges enrolled at least some cohorts of students into two or more courses. However, at most colleges, these programs involve only a small proportion of students. For example, about 60 percent of two-year colleges enroll at least some students in learning communities, but fewer than 20 percent of these colleges enroll more than 10 percent of freshmen in such programs.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990.

<sup>25</sup>Levine Laufgraben and Shapiro, 2004.

<sup>26</sup>Shapiro and Levine, 1999.

<sup>27</sup>The learning-community model is also used extensively in high schools. For more information, see Kemple and Herlihy, 2004, and Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith, 2005.

<sup>28</sup>Barefoot, 2002.

## Studies on Learning Communities

Many studies have discussed the implementation of learning communities and described students' and instructors' experiences in these programs, but relatively few have attempted to measure how learning communities affect key outcomes such as student persistence, course completion, and degree attainment.<sup>29</sup>

The studies that have examined program effects have generally found promising results. For example, Tinto's study of a program at LaGuardia Community College (like Kingsborough, part of the City University of New York) found that students in a learning community were more likely to pass their courses than students who took the same courses outside of the program. Similarly, the percentage of students who enrolled in school the fall after their first year was about 70 percent for students who had been in the learning-community program during their first year and 63 percent for comparison group students.<sup>30</sup> Tinto found similar results in an evaluation of a learning community program at Seattle Central Community College.<sup>31</sup> Many experts believe that learning communities are particularly promising for students taking developmental courses.<sup>32</sup>

Although promising, these results are far from definitive because all of the studies used quasi-experimental designs: They compared students who voluntarily enrolled in learning communities with students who chose not to enroll in such programs. Thus, differences in outcomes may well be attributable to differences in the measured or unmeasured characteristics of students in the two groups — rather than to the learning-community programs themselves. For example, students who choose to join a learning-community program may be, on average, more motivated than students who do not. As noted earlier, the Opening Doors evaluation at Kingsborough appears to be the first evaluation of a learning-community program to use a random assignment research design, the gold standard for evaluations of social programs.

## A Brief History of Learning Communities at Kingsborough

Kingsborough began experimenting with learning communities in the mid-1990s, with a program targeted to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students who were entering degree programs. Later, using a federal grant, the college created a second learning-community program targeting students in four “career majors” — accounting, business, mental health, and early-childhood education. The college collected data on the performance of students in both programs

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<sup>29</sup>For examples of studies of learning communities, see the National Learning Communities Project Web site: <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>.

<sup>30</sup>Tinto, 1998.

<sup>31</sup>Tinto, 1997.

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, Grubb, 2001.

and concluded that rates of course completion, retention, and grade-point averages were higher for students in learning communities than for the general population at Kingsborough.

When MDRC approached Kingsborough to discuss Opening Doors, the college leadership saw an opportunity to further expand and rigorously test the learning-communities approach. The program they created, called Opening Doors Learning Communities, started operating in the 2003-2004 academic year. Special funding was provided by the Robin Hood Foundation, which supports programs that aim to reduce poverty in New York City.

## **Kingsborough’s Opening Doors Learning Communities Program**

Since its inception, the Opening Doors Learning Communities program has targeted first-time freshmen who attend school full time, during the day. At first, the program mainly targeted students who identified their major as Liberal Arts, since many students in that group do not have clear academic or career goals.<sup>33</sup> In addition, administrators have focused special attention on “direct admits” — students who miss the university-wide application deadline and apply directly to Kingsborough, often just days or weeks before the start of classes. College data showed that these two overlapping groups of students tended to have poor outcomes, suggesting that they might benefit from Opening Doors.<sup>34</sup>

The Opening Doors Learning Community program uses the common paired- or clustered-course model described earlier: Participating students are divided into groups of up to 25 each. The students in each group form a learning community, taking three courses together: an English course, usually at the remedial/developmental level; an academic course required for their major, called a “content course” at Kingsborough (for example, psychology, health, or speech); and a one-credit freshman orientation class called Student Development 10. Student Development 10, which is open to all Kingsborough freshmen, teaches time-management, study skills, college rules and procedures, exploration of learning styles, career exploration, multicultural diversity, and other topics relevant to a new college student; similar courses are offered at many two-year and four-year colleges.

Figure 3 shows the actual class schedules for 2 of the 11 Opening Doors learning communities that operated during the fall 2004 semester. The first panel is the schedule for a learn-

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<sup>33</sup>The federal grant described above expired after the 2003-2004 academic year, and students from the four “career majors” were then folded into the Opening Doors Learning Communities program.

<sup>34</sup>In addition, during the first semester of program operations, Kingsborough’s Opening Doors program was only open to students between ages 18 and 34 who reported household income below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. In subsequent semesters, the income criterion was removed (having been deemed unnecessary because such a large proportion of Kingsborough students are from low- or moderate-income families), and 17-year-olds were admitted to the program with parental consent.

ing community that linked a credit-bearing English course (English 12) with a sociology course (Sociology 31) and Student Development 10. The second panel shows the schedule for a learning community that linked the lowest level developmental English course (English 91) with a health course (HPE 12) and Student Development 10.

As the figure shows, Opening Doors courses are “block-scheduled” so that they meet one after the other. This efficient scheduling minimizes the amount of time a student needs to be on campus, making it easier to balance school with work and family obligations. In addition, all Opening Doors courses meet at convenient times, generally between 9 A.M. and 3 P.M., Monday through Thursday.<sup>35</sup>

A typical full-time course load at Kingsborough involves 12 credits (12 hours of class per week). Because the lower-level developmental English courses meet for eight hours each week, the content courses are typically three credits, and Student Development 10 is one credit, students at the lower English levels usually take no additional unlinked courses.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, students in higher-level English courses, which meet for fewer hours per week, usually take at least one non-Opening Doors course. For example, the linked Opening Doors courses for the schedule shown in the first panel of Figure 3 total only eight credits.

Faculty who teach the linked courses have a reduced teaching load, allowing them to meet regularly during the semester to discuss student progress, identify strategies to assist students having difficulty, and coordinate assignments. In effect, a three-credit course taught in the context of Opening Doors is treated as a four-credit course when determining a faculty member’s teaching load. (Participating faculty also receive compensation for time spent planning their Opening Doors course during the six-week module preceding the semester.)

In addition to the linked course structure, Opening Doors at Kingsborough includes several other components designed to address barriers to retention and academic success:

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<sup>35</sup>Kingsborough is planning to offer an additional learning community for evening students in fall 2005.

<sup>36</sup>Students’ English placements are determined by their scores on the reading and writing skills assessment tests. The Opening Doors Learning Communities program serves students who have been placed in English 91, English 92, English 93, or English 12. English 91, 92, and 93 are all developmental courses that earn no academic credit. English 91 and 92 are lower-level developmental courses, targeted mainly to students who fail both the reading and writing skills tests. Both courses meet for eight hours per week. English 93, the highest-level developmental course (targeted to students who fail only the writing skills test) and English 12, a credit-bearing freshman English course, meet for four hours per week.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Figure 3**

**Schedules Showing Linked Courses in Kingsborough Community College's 2004 Opening Doors Program**

**Sociology Link (10)**

**English 12 (ENG 12) and Sociology 31 (SOC 31)**

**Instructors: Annie Fleissner and Susan Lachman**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>A</b> (8:00-9:00)					
<b>B</b> (9:10-10:10)					
<b>C</b> (10:20-11:20)					
<b>D</b> (11:30-12:30)	<b>ENG 000LB</b> (0.0 Credits) TBD				
<b>E</b> (12:40-1:40)	<b>SOC 31</b> (3.0 Credits) S. Lachman	<b>SD 10</b> (1.0 Credit) Z. Rodriguez	<b>SOC 31</b> (3.0 Credits) S. Lachman	<b>SOC 31</b> (3.0 Credits) S. Lachman	
<b>F</b> (1:50-2:50)	<b>ENG 12</b> (4.0 Credits) A. Fleissner				
<b>G</b> (3:00-4:40)					

(continued)

- **Enhanced counseling and support.** In each learning community, the Student Development 10 course is taught by an Opening Doors counselor, who works proactively to identify and resolve students' barriers to good attendance and performance. Ideally, the instructor participates in regular meetings with the other two faculty members in a given learning community during the semester, creating an effective "early warning" system to identify students needing assistance — for example, students who have been missing class or who are having difficulty with assignments. Typically, each Opening Doors counselor is responsible for three or four learning communities (75 to 100 students in all).

**Figure 3 (continued)**

**Health Link (1)**  
**English 91 (ENG 91) and Health 12 (HPE 12)**  
**Instructors: Vanessa Santaga and Mel David**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>A</b> (8:00-9:00)					
<b>B</b> (9:10-10:10)					
<b>C</b> (10:20-11:20)	<b>ENG 91</b> (8.0 EQ Credits) V. Santaga				
<b>D</b> (11:30-12:30)	<b>ENG 91</b> (8.0 EQ Credits) V. Santaga				
<b>E</b> (12:40-1:40)					
<b>F</b> (1:50-2:50)	<b>HPE 12</b> (3.0 Credits) M. David	<b>HPE 12</b> (3.0 Credits) M. David	<b>HPE 12</b> (3.0 Credits) M. David	<b>SD 10</b> (1.0 Credit) S. Ricottone	
<b>G</b> (3:00-4:30)					

SOURCE: Kingsborough Community College.

NOTES: The schedules represented here are actual schedules from Kingsborough Community College. Linked courses form the core of the Opening Doors Learning Communities program at Kingsborough. All combinations of Kingsborough's linked courses include one English course; one "content course" (covering an academic subject other than English); and Student Development 10 (SD10), a skills course for new students.

"EQ credits" stands for equated credits. Equated credits are weekly class hours in developmental and compensatory courses for which actual credit is not allowed. For certain purposes, such as determining financial aid eligibility, equated credits may be counted in the same manner as regular credits.

- **Enhanced tutoring.** Normally, tutors are assigned to developmental English courses at Kingsborough — and may actually attend the classes — but otherwise students access tutoring by visiting a central lab. In the Opening Doors program, a tutor is assigned to each learning community and attends both the English course and, in many cases, the subject-matter course. As a result, tutors are much more familiar with the material being covered — and

with the students. They are well positioned both to help with the work in a given course and to help students draw connections across the linked courses.

- **Book vouchers.** The high cost of college textbooks has been well documented, and studies have shown that many community college students do not purchase the books for their courses; they attempt to share or borrow books or simply get by without them.<sup>37</sup> Redeemable at the campus bookstore, the Opening Doors book voucher is worth up to \$150 during the initial 12-week session. Students who return for the 6-week winter/summer module receive a second voucher worth up to \$75.<sup>38</sup>

Opening Doors operates only during a student's first semester at Kingsborough. In fact, the core feature of the program, the linked classes, exists only during the first 12-week module. Students are no longer scheduled as a cohort during the following 6-week module, although, during those 6 weeks, they receive a second book voucher and are still connected to the Opening Doors counselors. Also, as discussed in the next section, there are some social events designed to help students transition out of Opening Doors and into the regular college environment.

## Evaluating Opening Doors at Kingsborough

As mentioned previously, Opening Doors appears to be the first study to use a random assignment research design to test a mainstream community college program. Eligible freshmen are assigned, at random, to Opening Doors or to a control group (known locally as the General Population Group). MDRC will use surveys and academic records to follow the students in both groups for several years. Because students were assigned to the groups randomly, there were no systematic differences in the measured or unmeasured characteristics of the two groups at the start. Thus, any differences that emerge between the groups over time — for example, differences in credits earned or degree attainment — can reliably be attributed to the Opening Doors program, rather than to differences in the characteristics of students in the two groups. These differences are referred to as *impacts* or *effects* of the program.

### The nature of the comparison

In principle, students in the control group are treated as if Opening Doors did not exist. As shown in Table 1, many of the services and supports provided through Opening Doors — for example, tutoring and counseling — are available to all Kingsborough students (and, thus, to

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<sup>37</sup>*Community College Week*, 2003.

<sup>38</sup>During the 2003-2004 academic year, the book vouchers were worth up to \$200 during the 12-week session and up to \$100 during the 6-week session.

**Table 1**

**Key Differences Between the Opening Doors Learning Community and the Regular College Environment During the First Semester at Kingsborough Community College**

<b>Program Feature</b>	<b>Opening Doors Learning Community</b>	<b>Regular College Environment</b>
Block scheduling	Cohort of up to 25 students takes 3 courses together (in a group called a learning community); courses meet one after the other.	Students take courses whenever they are offered and available, with different students in each class.
Curricular integration	Curricula for the linked courses are integrated.	No integration across courses.
Class size	Maximum of 25 students in each course.	English courses typically have 25 students; content courses average about 30-35 students.
Student development course	All Opening Doors Learning Community students take Student Development 10 course.	Student Development 10 is encouraged but not required.
Developmental English courses	All Opening Doors Learning Community students who failed the reading or writing skills tests take a developmental English course.	Students who fail the reading or writing skills tests are encouraged, but not required, to take a developmental English course.
Tutoring	Tutor assigned to each learning community; attends classes.	Tutors assigned to developmental courses; otherwise, tutoring is accessed through central lab.
Counseling	An Opening Doors Learning Community counselor is assigned to each learning community; each counselor is responsible for 75 to 100 students; counselors work proactively to identify and resolve students' barriers to good attendance and academic performance.	Students can access counseling on their own initiative; caseload for freshmen counselors is roughly 500:1; counseling role is reactive.
Book voucher	A total of \$225 during the first semester.	No book voucher.

SOURCE: MDRC field research data.

the control group). However, the levels of intensity and, on the part of staff and instructors, proactivity are much greater in Opening Doors. For example, any student can seek personal counseling, but outside of Opening Doors (and a few other special programs), no one on staff at Kingsborough monitors students' attendance and performance and reaches out to them when a problem arises. Moreover, caseloads for regular college counselors are much larger than for

those in Opening Doors. Similarly, the Student Development 10 course is available to all freshmen, but Opening Doors students are required to take it.

### **The study intake process and sample sizes**

Potential study participants are identified during the weeks prior to the start of each semester. Staff begin by reviewing lists of applicants who have already taken the CUNY skills tests, because their scores on the reading and writing tests determine their English placement. Applicants whose scores place them in a developmental English course for native English speakers or in freshman English are invited to come to campus to register early for classes.<sup>39</sup>

Students who come in receive a brief, general description of the Opening Doors program at Kingsborough and are told that the program has sufficient funding to serve about half of eligible freshmen. Further, they are told that the program is part of a study, that it is only open to students who agree to be in the study, and that a random process will be used to determine which study participants will be placed in the program. Students who agree to participate in the study sign an informed consent form, provide some baseline demographic information, and complete a brief confidential survey (they receive a \$20 transit card as a reward for completing the paperwork). They are then randomly assigned to Opening Doors or to the control group and are given appropriate assistance registering for classes. (It is worth noting that students who came to a random assignment appointment and who were placed in the control group were — like the Opening Doors students — allowed to register for classes earlier than most Kingsborough freshmen, and they received advice on the registration process from Opening Doors staff. These slightly enhanced services mean that the research design is not completely “pure,” but it was deemed unethical and impractical to bring students to campus and then not allow them to register for classes.)

The sequence described above is ideal but, in reality, most Kingsborough freshman apply and take the CUNY skills tests so close to the start of the semester that they are unable to attend an early registration appointment (such students are the “direct admits” described earlier). As a result, the majority of participants enter the study during two or three large registration sessions that occur only about a week before classes begin. Opening Doors and MDRC staff attend these sessions and “intercept” freshman who have just learned their test scores and are about to register for classes. Potential study participants receive the explanation and complete the research paperwork in small groups, rather than individually. Random assignment is conducted on the spot, and students proceed to register for classes.

As shown in Table 2, the sample size has varied from semester to semester. During its first four semesters of operation, Kingsborough’s Opening Doors program was designed and staffed to serve approximately 250 students per semester. The number of students randomly

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<sup>39</sup>Because they are eligible for the English-as-a-Second-Language learning communities program mentioned earlier, students whose scores place them in English as a Second Language are not included in Kingsborough’s Opening Doors program.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

Table 2

### Number of Students Entering the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College, by Semester

Semester	Number of Learning Communities	Number of Students Assigned to the Opening Doors Group	Number of Students in Control Group	Average Number of Students in Each Opening Doors Learning Community
Fall 2003	10	192	195	19
Spring 2004	9	121	117	13
Fall 2004	11	266	265	24
Spring 2005	10	190	190	19

SOURCES: MDRC random assignment database. MDRC field research data.

NOTES: At Kingsborough Community College, learning communities are groups that consist of up to 25 first-year students who form a cohort that takes three "linked courses" (courses that are closely integrated in terms of scheduling and content).

assigned to the Opening Doors group was fairly close to that number in fall 2003, fall 2004, and spring 2005, but fell far short in spring 2004.<sup>40</sup> The shortfall meant that the program operated in an atypical manner in that semester, with unusually small class sizes.<sup>41</sup> The total sample size for the study exceeds 1,500 students (as discussed later, the results will be analyzed both for the full research sample and separately for each of the four entering cohorts).

### Limitations of the research design

Random assignment is clearly the most reliable research design for testing a program such as Opening Doors. Nevertheless, some compromises are necessary when this design is put to use in the real world.

For example, rules governing all research with human subjects require that students must give their informed consent before being enrolled into a study of this type. Although the vast majority of students who heard about the study were willing to participate, some refused, most often because they were not interested in the program or because they did not want to

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<sup>40</sup>The main reason for the shortfall was an unexpected shift in the composition of the incoming Kingsborough students during that semester. A smaller proportion were first-time freshmen and a larger proportion were transfer students, who are not eligible for Opening Doors at Kingsborough.

<sup>41</sup>The figures in the last column of Table 2 slightly overstate the average number of students per learning community, because they include the relatively small number of students who were randomly assigned to the Opening Doors group but who never enrolled in any classes.

spend time completing the initial paperwork. Other potentially eligible students were unintentionally omitted during the large registration sessions, or because one or more of the Opening Doors sections was full. Thus, the study results may not precisely predict what would happen if the program were made mandatory for all Kingsborough freshmen.<sup>42</sup>

More important, a random assignment design of this type cannot disentangle the effects of different program components. The Opening Doors Learning Community model includes some features — such as linked classes and block-scheduling — that are probably common to most or all learning community programs. Other components, such as smaller class sizes and enhanced student supports, may not be intrinsic to the model, but are probably present in many learning community initiatives. Then there are features like book vouchers and enhanced tutoring that were added in order to strengthen the model at Kingsborough, but that are not necessarily related to the learning community structure.

The random assignment design will produce very reliable evidence about the overall effects of this “package,” but it will provide less information about which components of the model are most important. For example, if Opening Doors has positive effects at Kingsborough, it will be hard to say with confidence whether the learning community structure itself was necessary to achieve the effects, or whether they were partly attributable to enhanced tutoring, book vouchers, or some other “extra” feature. MDRC’s study of the program’s implementation is designed to shed light on these questions.

Obtaining a clear answer about the effects of the entire package seems an appropriate goal for the first rigorous evaluation of a learning community model. Subsequent studies might be designed to look more carefully at the effects of specific program components, particularly those that are not intrinsic to the model and that involve substantial costs.

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<sup>42</sup>During the fall 2004 semester, there were approximately 1,900 students in the Kingsborough freshman class. Approximately one-third of these students attended part time or in the evening, or took ESL courses, making them ineligible for Opening Doors. A total of 531 students actually entered the study.

## The Opening Doors Students

Table 3 shows the demographic characteristics of the students who entered the Opening Doors study at Kingsborough just before the fall 2003 semester, the first semester that the Opening Doors program operated. The data are drawn from a brief questionnaire that students completed just before they went through the random assignment process.

As expected, the data reflect the tremendous diversity of the Kingsborough student body. As the table shows, about 40 percent of the students identified themselves as black (non-Hispanic), about one-fourth as white (non-Hispanic), and about one-fourth as Hispanic. Less than one-fourth of the students reported that they and both of their parents were born in the U.S., and nearly half indicated that a language other than English is spoken in their home. More than one-third reported that they are the first in their family to attend college and just under one-third are from households receiving some form of public assistance. More than half of the students reported that they intended to transfer to a four-year college.

Interestingly, the Kingsborough Opening Doors students are more “traditional” than typical community college students nationwide in some respects. A large majority are under age 21, most received a high school diploma (rather than a GED certificate) and graduated within the year prior to enrollment, and most are dependent on their parents (although only 44 percent of the sample has all four of these characteristics). Nationally, more than half of community college students are 24 or older and two-thirds are financially independent.<sup>43</sup>

This pattern partly reflects the fact that Kingsborough’s student body is somewhat younger than in the typical community college (see Section 1), but it is mostly attributable to the Opening Doors eligibility criteria. As discussed in the previous section, because of its structure, the program is open only to first-time freshman who attend Kingsborough full time, during the day. Kingsborough’s part-time, evening, and transfer student populations would likely include many older, financially independent students.

Table 4 shows the performance of the Opening Doors students on the CUNY reading, writing, and math skills assessment tests that they took prior to matriculation. Although all of the students have a high school diploma or GED certificate, only 12 percent passed all three skills tests — allowing them to avoid developmental courses (this is similar to the collegewide rate cited earlier). The table shows that the writing test, with a pass rate of only 25 percent, presents a special problem for incoming Kingsborough students.

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<sup>43</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, 2003.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 3**

**Characteristics of Kingsborough Community College  
Study Participants at the Time of Random Assignment, Fall 2003 Cohort**

Characteristic	Opening Doors Group and Control Group
Gender (%)	
Male	40.9
Female	59.1
Age (%)	
17 - 18 years old	43.7
19 - 20 years old	33.6
21 - 34 years old	22.7
Marital status (%)	
Married	3.1
Unmarried	96.9
Race/ethnicity (%) <sup>a</sup>	
Hispanic/Latino	23.3
Black, non-Hispanic	40.5
White, non-Hispanic	22.2
Asian or Pacific Islander	7.7
Other	6.3
Have one or more children (%)	8.1
Household receiving government benefits (%) <sup>b</sup>	30.2
Financially dependent on parents (%)	75.2
Ever employed (%)	79.8
Currently employed (%)	38.0
Diplomas/degrees earned (%)	
High school diploma	73.1
General Education Development (GED) certificate	28.2
Occupational/technical certificate	3.6
Date of high school graduation/GED receipt (%)	
During the past year	68.2
Between one and five years ago	26.8
More than five years ago	4.9
Main reason for enrolling in college (%)	
To complete a certificate program	3.1
To obtain an associate's degree	29.0
To transfer to a four-year college/university	52.3
To obtain/update job skills	10.4
Other	5.7

(continued)

**Table 3 (continued)**

Characteristic	Opening Doors Group and Control Group
First person in family to attend college (%)	35.2
Working personal computer in home (%)	77.1
Own or have access to a working car (%)	28.5
Language other than English spoken regularly in home (%)	45.7
U.S. citizen (%)	70.2
Respondent born outside U.S. (%) <sup>c</sup>	40.8
Respondent or respondent's parent(s) born outside U.S. (%) <sup>c</sup>	76.5
Region in which respondent was born (%)	
North America	59.3
Asia	6.2
Commonwealth of Independent States <sup>d</sup>	7.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	21.8
Other <sup>e</sup>	4.9
Region in which respondent's mother was born (%) <sup>f</sup>	
North America	23.0
Asia	8.6
Commonwealth of Independent States <sup>d</sup>	9.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	48.0
Other <sup>e</sup>	11.0
Sample size	387

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

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 387 sample members who completed a BIF and who are in the Fall 2003 cohort.

<sup>a</sup>Respondents who indicated that they are Hispanic and who also chose a race are included only in the Hispanic/Latino category.

<sup>b</sup>Benefits include unemployment/dislocated worker benefits, supplemental security income (SSI) or disability, cash assistance or welfare, food stamps, and Section 8 or public housing.

<sup>c</sup>U.S. includes both the United States and Puerto Rico.

<sup>d</sup>This region is comprised of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

<sup>e</sup>Other regions include the Baltics, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Near East, and Oceania.

<sup>f</sup>The majority of respondents reported that their parents were born in the same region as each other.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

Table 4

### Outcomes on City University of New York Skills Assessment Tests at the Time of Random Assignment for All Students in the Kingsborough Community College Fall 2003 Cohort

Outcome	Opening Doors Group and Control Group
Passed reading test (%)	68.5
Passed writing test (%)	24.9
Passed math test (%)	40.0
Passed all three tests (%)	12.2
Passed both the reading and writing tests (%)	23.5
Sample size	387

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for Fall 2003 sample members who had placement test data available. A small percentage of the sample (5 percent) is missing one or more placement tests.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

Before enrolling in any college in the City University of New York system (including Kingsborough), students must take three skills assessment tests: one in reading, one in writing, and one in math.

## Behind the Statistics

To paint a clearer picture of Kingsborough's Opening Doors population, the rest of this section tells the stories of six Opening Doors students, drawn more or less randomly from the fall 2003 developmental English class described earlier (the student's names have been changed to protect their privacy).<sup>44</sup> The stories both illustrate the diverse paths that students take to Kingsborough and provide disturbing evidence about the level of academic preparation many students receive in high school.

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<sup>44</sup>For a more extensive ethnographic study of students at another CUNY community college, see Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters, 2004.

## **Gilda**

Gilda grew up relatively comfortably in Quito, Ecuador, and attended a private high school. Though not the strongest student, Gilda expected to go on to college, as her siblings had done. Her plans changed when she became pregnant not long after graduation. After a falling-out with her family and the father of her child, she left for America, where several relatives lived.

The trip turned into a month-long adventure. Young and pregnant, but determined not to turn back, Gilda traveled with a group, via car, train, and on foot. Knowing almost no English, she joined her brother and cousins in Brooklyn, gave birth to a son, and went to work in Manhattan's jewelry district, in a store owned by an Ecuadorian.

A bright, articulate woman, Gilda started off cleaning jewelry, but steadily took on more and more responsibility until she became the unofficial store manager. She opened and closed the store alone, worked the counter, and knew the combination to the safe. She also took some English classes in the evenings.

After several years, Gilda concluded that the store owner was exploiting her and asked for a raise to match her increased responsibilities. The owner refused at first, apparently assuming that Gilda, a single mother without working papers, had no other options. When she finally told him she had "a better offer" and was quitting, he immediately offered to double her salary (to \$800 a week). It was too late. In fact, Gilda was doubly offended by the offer; she realized that the owner could have afforded to pay her fairly all along.

As it turned out, Gilda's better offer was from her new boyfriend, an attorney who suggested that she take a break from working to spend more time with her son, now in elementary school. Gilda jumped at the chance but, within a year or two, decided that she wanted more. In her words, "he is a lawyer, so I feel like I'm not at the same level. So it's kind of like, a challenge. I want to be...somebody. Not just nobody."

With her son doing extremely well in school and being old enough to care more for himself, Gilda started attending ESL classes at Kingsborough. Then, at age 32, 11 years after arriving in the U.S., she decided to enroll in college full time, aiming to become a social worker.

Gilda was not surprised when she failed all three of the CUNY skills tests. She had always had trouble with math and, though she had learned to speak English fluently, her reading and writing skills were not strong.

Upon entering Kingsborough, she found that she was the oldest student — and the only parent — in her Opening Doors learning community. She was also different from many of her fellow students in that she did not have to work while in school.

## David

David was raised just a few miles from the Kingsborough campus but, in some respects, he traveled further than any of his classmates to get to college, having grown up in a tightly insular Hasidic Jewish community.

The Hasidic communities in Brooklyn emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, after the Holocaust wiped out much of Eastern European Jewry. Distinct Hasidic sects, following charismatic rabbis and named for their towns of origin in Europe, live primarily in the Crown Heights, Williamsburg, and Borough Park neighborhoods.

Numbering perhaps 100,000 in all, the Hasidim are sometimes compared with the Amish, who also shun most aspects of mainstream American culture. Like their Amish counterparts, Hasidic men, with their long beards and sidelocks, long black coats and black hats, seem to come from another time and place. But there are differences between the two groups. For one, the Hasidim live in the midst of a densely populated city that is a hub of popular culture. And, because they tend to vote as a block, the Hasidim are a force in New York City politics.

David's neighborhood, Crown Heights, with its dense mix of Caribbean blacks and Hasidim from the Lubavicher sect, became a symbol of racial turmoil in 1991, when a car traveling in the entourage of a Hasidic rabbi struck and killed a 7-year-old black child. Long-simmering tensions erupted into a riot that lasted three days. A 29-year-old Jewish student was stabbed and killed in the melee. David Dinkins, New York's first black mayor, was accused by some of failing to act aggressively to halt the violence, and many believe the incident helped to propel Rudolph Guiliani into office in 1993.

David says his father started out as an "All-American boy" who graduated from New York University and then underwent a religious conversion in the early 1970s. David grew up in a four-bedroom apartment with his parents and 10 siblings. He had virtually no contact with television, radio, or movies. His parents read only Jewish newspapers. Although many Hasidim speak only Yiddish at home, David's family spoke English: His father, from a secular background, did not speak Yiddish, nor did his mother, an immigrant from Israel.

About the religious life, David says, "I knew from an early age that wasn't the lifestyle I wanted." He attended Hasidic schools in Brooklyn until age 16, by which time he had become known as something of a rebel. He went off to Hasidic boarding schools in Florida and Minnesota, but felt that he didn't fit in.

According to David, the Hasidic schools provided almost no instruction in secular subjects. He says he never learned the fundamentals of reading and writing English and never took math. The schools did not offer a recognized high school diploma, and college was not encouraged.

Eventually, David moved to Israel, where he briefly went to school and then “hung out” for another year and a half. He returned to the United States and moved to Pittsburgh, where he worked as a waiter for two years. Moving back to Crown Heights, David eventually became manager of a restaurant. At that point, he says, he began to take control of his life. “My pay was decent — about \$50,000 a year. It was alright, but I just felt like it wasn’t going to get me anywhere. I don’t want to work nights and weekends for the rest of my life.”

At age 24, David took and — to his surprise — passed the GED certificate exam. He wanted to attend Brooklyn College but was steered to Kingsborough because his GED score was low. He failed all three CUNY skills assessment tests, and was assigned to the lowest-level developmental English course.

When he started at Kingsborough, David was working at a bakery in the afternoons, from 2:00 to 7:00. He was planning to complete an associate’s degree, transfer to Brooklyn College, and eventually attend medical school.

## **Amina**

Amina, an enthusiastic, earnest 19-year-old, never wanted to attend Kingsborough. Her journey to the college began 10,000 miles away, in Bangladesh, a country that has been plagued by political turmoil, violence, and natural disasters throughout its brief history. Today, the country — smaller than the state of Iowa — is crammed with a predominantly Muslim population of around 140 million. Per capita annual income is around \$400 and only 35 percent of the adult population is literate. According to the census, Bangladeshis were the fastest growing Asian immigrant group in New York City during the 1990s. The official figures show that the Bangladeshi population jumped from about 5,000 to nearly 30,000 in just 10 years, and one wonders if the latter figure is an underestimate: There are seven Bangladeshi newspapers in the city and, according to one of those papers, some 7,500 Bangladeshi taxi drivers.

The oldest of five girls, Amina spent her early childhood in a small town (with no electricity) but moved to Dhaka, the capital city with a population of 9 million, when she was seven years old. Amina describes her life in Bangladesh as “middle class” — she attended private schools and did not suffer the severe poverty that afflicts many Bangladeshis.

Amina’s father came to the United States around the time of Amina’s birth and worked in the construction industry. She saw him only sporadically during her childhood. Her father brought the family to New York when Amina was 13. Amina had grown up speaking Bengali and, though she had studied English in school, her English was quite limited when she arrived. She attended a special high school for immigrants for one year, and then transferred to a regular public high school in Manhattan. Her grades were good, particularly in math and science, but

she struggled more with English, and especially with writing. Amina's parents still speak Bengali at home, though she says she often answers them in English.

Her parents did not go to college, but, from an early age, she was determined to do so. Her goal is to become a pediatrician. Amina wanted to attend Brooklyn College and was bitterly disappointed when she failed the CUNY English skills test and was steered to Kingsborough. Several of her friends from high school had been accepted to four-year schools. "At the beginning, I thought, I'm not going here," she remembered. "I'm going to skip one semester. I'll make sure my scores are higher. After the letter, I was like, okay, I should go to college and not waste my time getting mad and stuff." Amina expected to attend Kingsborough for a semester or two, complete her developmental English requirements, and then transfer to a four-year school.

When she started at Kingsborough, Amina was living with her parents. She took two subways and a bus to travel 90 minutes each way to and from school. Her parents were supporting her, and she was not working.

## **Joseph**

With his hip-hop clothes and mellow, soft-spoken manner, Joseph defines a certain kind of urban cool. He grew up in Montreal, speaking French both at home and in school. His parents, both from Haiti, were not together during those years: Joseph lived with his mother and siblings, and his father lived in the New York but visited regularly. Joseph describes his family's status as "middle class" — both of his parents had attended college, his mother worked as a nurse, and they lived in a "peaceful" neighborhood.

When Joseph was 13 years old, his mother moved the family to Brooklyn, apparently because she wanted to reunite with Joseph's father. Joseph, who spoke some English but did not write it well, attended a public high school that received some positive attention in the early 1990s but is now slated to be phased out because of its poor academic performance. Joseph says he was an "in-between" student, but it seems that the expectations were low. During his freshman year at Kingsborough, in an essay about his high school, Joseph wrote, "They never taught me how to write an essay or a summary, and they never encouraged us to read at all."

Joseph graduated at age 17 and immediately moved back to Montreal, where he lived on his own, worked at McDonald's, and took some night classes. After a year or so, he stopped working, quit school, and began to spend most of his time "partying." After a year or two, Joseph says, "I just woke up one day and I was tired of doing the same thing every day. I just told myself that I needed to wake up. It was actually because I saw other people doing bigger moves, so I wanted to do big moves too." Some of the motivation to change came from a cousin, who had finished school and was working for IBM. Joseph, who had always loved tinkering with computers, decided that he wanted to try to work in the field as well.

He considered starting college in Canada, but realized that there were “too many distractions,” so he returned to Brooklyn and moved back in with his mother (his parents had split up again, and his mother had another nursing job). He knew nothing about local colleges, so his mother recommended that he start at Kingsborough. Joseph passed the CUNY math skills test but failed the writing test — no surprise, given his limited exposure to English as a child and his weak high school preparation.

Starting at Kingsborough at age 20, Joseph expected to complete his associate’s degree, transfer to a four-year school, and eventually work in a “technical” job in the computer field. He was living with his mother and looking for a part-time job, but was not working.

## **Sharon**

Of the six students profiled here, Sharon comes closest to meeting the official definition of a “traditional” college student. She was born and raised in the United States, considers English her first language, attended a public high school, and started college full-time the fall after graduation. But these sparse facts hide a complicated, difficult story.

A talkative young woman, in turns silly and hard-edged, Sharon, like Joseph, is the child of Haitian immigrants. She grew up in Brooklyn, speaking both Creole and English, and attended a public high school with a fairly well-regarded program focusing on health careers. The school’s population is more than 80 percent female, and more than 95 percent African American or Latino. Sharon reports that she did well in her classes, and that her teachers “loved her.” She also held an internship at the office of a large HMO in Manhattan. But her social experience in high school was less positive. Sharon says that her fellow students “would pick on me for stupid stuff. Immature stuff....They were jealous of me, I guess.”

When she enrolled at Kingsborough, Sharon was living in a private house with her mother. At one time a home-health aide, her mother had been unable to work for some time because of health problems. In Sharon’s words, her mother “sees dead people.” Sharon described her mother’s condition as a mental health problem, but also saw a religious element at work. She said that her mother “had evil spirits inside of her and she wanted to take them out, so she went to go baptize, but, the thing is, she wasn’t ready for that, so instead of making the evil spirit turn into a good spirit it mixed together.” Sharon said that her mother had recently spent time in the somewhat notorious psychiatric ward of a Brooklyn public hospital.

Sharon has never lived with her father but has been in steady contact with him throughout her life. In fact, her father, a taxi driver who has physical health problems, pays the rent on the house she shares with her mother and gives Sharon money for a transit card every week.

Like Amina, Sharon did not want to attend Kingsborough. She knew the school well because her boyfriend started at Kingsborough while Sharon was still in high school, and she says that she used to cut school to go visit him. Still, Sharon had her heart set on Staten Island College, which she heard had a strong nursing program. Sharon was stunned when she failed the reading and writing portions of the CUNY placement test, because her high school grades had been solid. She attended an English immersion program at Kingsborough during the summer prior to her freshman year but failed both tests again at the end of the program. After the second failure, she said she was “crying in the bathroom.”

At the beginning of her first semester, Sharon was determined to complete her developmental requirements and transfer out of Kingsborough. In her words,

Some people wait until they are 28 years old to finish college. No, I’m going to do it while I’m still young. I’m 19 years old right now, and...I’m going to do what I have to do to get out of here because this is ridiculous. We are poor, we don’t have any money...and it’s not fair for me to say I’m not going to college. Because that’s my father’s dream before he dies, that I should become something, and I’m going to do it for him. I’m going to do it for him and my mother.

When she started Kingsborough, Sharon was living with her mother and working part time in a work-study job in a campus administrative office.

## **Steven**

With his close-cropped hair and burly physique, Steven looks like a stereotypical Brooklyn tough guy. In private, however, he is bright, funny, and thoughtful. His ethnic background is a typical Brooklyn stew: His mother is Puerto Rican and his father is from Greece but grew up in Australia.

Steven grew up in Sunset Park, a working-class Brooklyn neighborhood with a large Latino population. As a young child, he lived with both parents. Steven’s father worked an array of jobs — taxi driver, restaurant cook, construction worker. His mother worked before Steven was born but quit her job to raise Steven and his brother. She was a housewife for much of his childhood. His parents separated when he was 14, and his father eventually moved to Virginia. His mother went to work full time at a local hospital.

The family’s economic status varied depending on whether both parents worked. At first, Steven described the family’s status as “comfortable,” but then he elaborated: “We were definitely struggling with the bills. There were times when we’d go without electricity for two days and have our candles out, or sometimes no money in the house for food.”

Steven went to local public schools but dropped out in his first year of high school. He said that he did not leave school because he found the work difficult, but rather for social reasons:

It was horrible. It wasn't hard for me to understand. It's just dealing with all the people in the school. I had a lot of friends in my class and I ended up cutting or not doing homework. I was lazy too. And then there were just people in class that I didn't want to see so I wouldn't go and eventually it just piled up on me. There was just no — I couldn't make it up. I would have still been in high school right now.

Steven started working at age 14 at Nathan's, the famous Coney Island hot dog stand. After leaving school, he worked in a series of jobs: as a furniture mover, as a porter in an apartment building, and as a floor manager at a sporting goods store, to name a few. Some of the jobs paid fairly well. Steven estimated that one of them allowed him to bring home, off the books, close to \$700 per week. The porter job paid \$13 an hour, plus substantial end-of-year tips. (Steven joked that the building residents, whom he described as "snobs," did not realize that he made a decent wage, and therefore tended to give him generous tips as a sympathy gesture.)

Despite his skill at finding decent-paying jobs, Steven was not quite satisfied. He passed the GED certificate exam (on the third try), but says he wasn't initially thinking of going back to school. Then he "woke up one morning and decided to go to college." Much to his surprise, he failed both the reading and writing CUNY skills tests, but he decided to push forward anyway. His goal was a career in acting or broadcasting, and he felt that college would help him get there: "You meet people, you make connections, it opens up a lot of doors. Even if you don't get a degree, you've met so many people and have so many connections...."

When he started at Kingsborough, Steven and his girlfriend (also a student at the college) were both living with Steven's mother and brother in the Bay Ridge neighborhood (the setting for the movie *Saturday Night Fever*) — hoping to find a place of their own but unable to afford one. Steven worked in the campus bookstore for the first few weeks of school but was laid off after the early semester rush.



## Operating Opening Doors at Kingsborough

At first glance, the task of mounting and operating a learning community program may seem relatively straightforward — mainly a matter of logistics and scheduling. The reality is far more complex. In order to run effectively, learning communities must overcome resistance to change and must gain cooperation from disparate parts of an institution that may have little experience working together. As in any large organization, promoting change and collaboration in a community college is no small feat.

This section is not a full-fledged analysis of the implementation of Kingsborough's Opening Doors program. Rather, it provides a sense of the kinds of issues that emerged as the program got under way at Kingsborough, particularly during fall 2003, the first semester of program operations. This information is helpful in interpreting the impact results presented in the next section, most of which focus on the students who participated in Opening Doors during that initial semester.

### The Big Picture

Kingsborough had one important advantage in mounting an Opening Doors program: It could build on the experience gained from two earlier (albeit smaller) learning community initiatives. At the same time, Kingsborough faced two special challenges. First, as discussed further below, operating the Opening Doors program in the context of a random assignment experiment created unique problems, particularly during the registration process.

Second, to meet the overall project schedule and take full advantage of external funding, Kingsborough needed to mount the program very quickly. Detailed planning did not begin until the spring of 2003, after course assignments and schedules had already been set for the fall semester. Compounding the challenge, the academic affairs administrator with lead responsibility for planning the program became ill and missed several months of work just before and after the program was launched.

Given these difficult circumstances, it is impressive that Kingsborough was able to put the entire complex program structure in place for the start of the semester: Courses were identified and set aside for Opening Doors students, 10 block schedules were created, faculty were recruited to teach the Opening Doors courses, a mechanism for dispersing book vouchers was established, and the Opening Doors counseling staff were hired and on board in time for registration. Moreover, while there were a number of specific startup problems (discussed below), the main features of the program generally operated as designed throughout the semester. This

considerable achievement was only possible because Opening Doors received very strong support at all levels of the college administration and from many of the academic departments.

To a large extent, the challenges discussed below are the kinds of startup issues that affect all new programs. Indeed, it seems clear that Opening Doors became stronger over time: The program's managers worked hard to identify and correct problems. Kingsborough has received ongoing support in this process from the National Learning Communities Project at Evergreen State College, which provides technical assistance to colleges implementing learning communities.

## **Recruiting and Training Faculty**

A technical assistance guide on learning communities notes that, while college faculty are often innovators in the classroom and in their academic disciplines, they are “frequently slow to accept changes that appear to alter traditional relationships between faculty and administration, faculty and students, faculty in their own departments, other departments, and the [college] community at large. In this respect, learning communities introduce serious challenges to the usual way of doing things.”<sup>45</sup>

The guide goes on to recommend a careful process for attracting and recruiting faculty to teach in learning communities. For example, it suggests recruiting “star quality” faculty early on and giving them substantive roles in planning the program, thereby creating an atmosphere that attracts other faculty to the initiative. Unfortunately, given the extremely tight time frame for program startup, such a process was not feasible at Kingsborough. Thus, while some of the faculty who agreed to teach in the Opening Doors learning communities did so enthusiastically (some had participated in one of the earlier learning-community initiatives), others were recruited by department chairs, and may not have fully understood what was involved.

Similarly, the compressed schedule made it difficult to carefully consider how to pair faculty to teach the linked courses. Ideally, faculty pairs would have emerged through an organic process, based on professional relationships or shared academic interests. In reality, during the first semester, pairings were created mostly based on schedules and other logistical factors, and many faculty were asked to collaborate with people they had never met.

Finally, there was little time available to provide special training. Tasks such as integrating curricula and working collaboratively with counselors were new to many of the participating faculty, and, for the most part, they needed to learn such tasks through trial and error. Adding to the challenge was the fact that faculty did not receive special compensation for planning efforts prior to the start of the semester (that is, during the preceding six-week module).

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<sup>45</sup>Shapiro and Levine, 1999.

Many of these issues were addressed in later semesters. For example, as knowledge about Opening Doors spread among faculty, more instructors began to come forward voluntarily to express interest in the program (as an illustration of the college's long-term commitment to this approach, when Kingsborough hired a large number of new faculty in 2004, administrators asked all candidates about their interest in teaching in a learning community). In some cases, pairs of faculty from different departments proposed a specific linkage between courses they taught. In addition, faculty development opportunities (some of which were delivered by consultants associated with the Evergreen project) were incorporated in later semesters, as was compensation for presemester planning.

## **Registration and Student Enrollment**

As discussed earlier, MDRC and Kingsborough worked together to insert the study enrollment and random assignment procedures into the Kingsborough student registration process. Anyone who has observed the registration process in a large community college can imagine that this, in itself, was no small feat; it is no surprise that a significant number of potential participants slipped through the cracks during the first semester. The registration process worked much more smoothly in later semesters, as administrators made changes to address the initial problems.

Once students learned that they had been assigned to the Opening Doors group, they met immediately with a program counselor for advisement and registration. In most cases, this was a relatively straightforward process because the choices were quite constrained. For example, in fall 2003, there were a total of 10 Opening Doors learning communities, structured around different combinations of three linked courses, as described below.

1. English 91 (lowest-level developmental English): linked to Speech and Student Development 10 (two learning communities linked these courses).
2. English 92 (middle-level developmental English): linked to Music and Student Development 10.
3. English 92: linked to Health and Student Development 10 (two learning communities linked these courses).
4. English 93 (highest-level developmental English): linked to Psychology and Student Development 10.
5. English 93: linked to U.S. History and Student Development 10.
6. English 93: linked to Political Science and Student Development 10.

7. English 12 (credit-bearing freshman English): linked to Sociology and Student Development 10.
8. English 12: linked to Philosophy and Student Development 10.

Thus, for example, a student whose test scores placed him in English 92 could choose from three possible schedules (two of which involved the same three courses). Limited flexibility is inevitable, in part because there are relatively few content courses that are appropriate for students whose reading and writing skills are poor.

In order to design the learning communities, administrators needed to predict, in advance, how many study participants would test into each of the four English levels. They were guided by historical test score data, but the patterns tended to fluctuate from year to year. Moreover, they had no way to predict what proportion of the eligible students would agree to participate in the study.

To make matters worse, random assignment greatly reduced the margin for error. In discussing the random assignment process with MDRC upfront, administrators wanted to fill the available Opening Doors slots and then assign any additional eligible students to the control group. Unfortunately, however, this would not have created comparable groups (the students who register earlier may be systematically different from those who register later). To make the process work for the evaluation, each student who entered the study had to have a fifty percent chance of being placed in the Opening Doors group or in the control group.

In the end, the number of study participants who tested at the English 92 level was substantially smaller than anticipated. Thus, two of the three learning communities that included English 92 were very small, creating a situation that was far from ideal, both pedagogically and financially. Because of the random assignment design, administrators were not able to use control group students to fill up the small Opening Doors course sections.

This issue emerged again in spring 2004, when the overall number of incoming freshmen eligible for Opening Doors was much smaller than projected. Thus, as discussed earlier, most of the learning communities operated with many fewer than 25 students. The process worked much more smoothly in the 2004-2005 academic year, as administrators worked with MDRC to refine the registration and random assignment procedures.

## **Collaboration Within the Learning Communities**

Ideally, all three members of each learning community team (the English instructor, the content course instructor, and the Student Development 10 counselor-instructor) meet prior to the semester to plan and integrate their courses, and then meet weekly or biweekly throughout

the semester to review student progress, develop strategies to assist students in need, coordinate assignments and grading, and make midcourse corrections.

Interviews with participating faculty during the fall 2003 semester revealed great variation in how the teams functioned in practice. Some of the teams were closely coordinated in the manner described above. Other teams met regularly to discuss student progress, but the courses were not closely integrated at the curricular level. Finally, in several cases, the English and the course-content faculty were working together fairly closely but were not consistently involving the Student Development 10 counselor-instructors. The lack of ongoing communication could sometimes be traced to logistical and scheduling issues. At Kingsborough, as at most community colleges, a large percentage of the faculty (about two-thirds) are part-time adjuncts. Similarly, during the first semester of program operations, two of the three Opening Doors counselor-instructors worked part time. When two or more members of a team had different part-time schedules, it was very difficult to organize regular face-to-face meetings.

In other instances, it appeared that the faculty did not fully understand or appreciate what the counselor could contribute. The technical assistance guide cited earlier identifies a sharp divide between the academic and student affairs divisions on most campuses, and describes the divide as a serious barrier that must be overcome in order to run an effective learning community program. At Kingsborough, the academic affairs and student development divisions forged a very close linkage at the administrative level, but it was challenging to translate this message of collaboration to the faculty involved. This task was made even more difficult by the compressed startup schedule. In some cases, team members did not meet one another until just before the semester began and were never able to establish a close working relationship. In addition, as discussed earlier, there were few opportunities to provide special training for participating faculty and staff.

Despite these obstacles, there were many examples of close coordination and collaboration within the teams. Many of the English instructors redesigned their syllabi to include both fiction and nonfiction readings as well as writing assignments that related to the material being taught in the content course. Many of the faculty pairs gave joint writing assignments that were graded by both of them. The six students described in the previous section were quite aware that their instructors were working together and that their courses were linked.

Moreover, in a number of cases, counselors were able to reach out proactively to assist students who were having difficulty with their classwork or who had poor attendance. In fact, one of the six students ended up receiving extensive personal counseling from her Student Development 10 instructor, even after she finished the program.

## Transitioning Students Out of the Program

The core features of Kingsborough's Opening Doors program only operate during the first 12-week module of a student's first semester at Kingsborough. The subsequent 6-week module serves as a transition period. Students who attend classes during the shorter session continue to be assigned to their Opening Doors counselor — who may help them register for courses during the upcoming semester — and they receive another book voucher if they enroll in courses that take place during the 6-week module.<sup>46</sup> Kingsborough decided that there was no practical way to maintain the linked-course structure after the first module, since students needed and wanted to take a variety of different courses in subsequent semesters.

Program administrators struggled to develop an appropriate way to ease students out of the highly structured, supportive environment of Opening Doors into the larger college community. Interestingly, while they were in the program, several of the students who were described in the previous section complained that they were tired of attending classes with the same students every day. However, after leaving the program and experiencing the relatively anonymous life of a regular student, they admitted that they missed the program and understood the advantage of the group structure.

During fall 2003, program staff organized a festive “graduation” ceremony to take place during the 6-week winter module. Students received awards for completion of the program and were encouraged to meet the staff from the general freshmen counseling program. The event was successful, but attendance was uneven because only about half of the Opening Doors students had registered for classes during that time. In subsequent semesters, the event was held near the end of the 12-week module, while students were still on campus.

The question of how long a learning community program should continue is complicated. While the advantages of the cohort-based structure are obvious, the program is relatively costly.<sup>47</sup> In addition, as discussed earlier, the logistical challenge of linking classes increases as students move beyond their first semester. Finally, the program is designed on the assumption that students' early experiences at college help to determine their later success. Administrators at Kingsborough believed it was important for students to transition into the regular college community as quickly as possible.

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<sup>46</sup>Kingsborough students usually receive academic advising from faculty in the department of their major. However, the Opening Doors counselors provide academic advising to liberal arts students, who constituted the majority of program participants during the first semester of operations.

<sup>47</sup>The key additional costs of the Opening Doors program at Kingsborough include smaller class sizes, faculty compensation for planning and coordination activities, additional counseling staff, and book vouchers. These features would not necessarily be included in every learning community program. Overall, the program entails additional costs of at least \$1,000 per student.

## Implications for the Evaluation

The Opening Doors model at Kingsborough uses several mutually reinforcing strategies to improve students' academic outcomes: The group structure is designed to build social connections among students and between students and faculty or students and staff; the linking of course curricula is intended to make the material in both English and the content course more relevant and accessible; smaller class sizes and enhanced tutoring are designed to increase the attention each student receives; and enhanced student services are intended to identify and address barriers to steady attendance and persistence.

The implementation story described above suggests that, at least during the first semester of operations, these strategies were present to varying degrees, depending on the learning community to which a student was assigned. For example, almost all Opening Doors students took their classes with the same group of fellow students — suggesting that the social element of the program was almost universally present — but only a subset experienced truly integrated course curricula. Similarly, while all students were assigned to a counselor with a lower-than-normal caseload, in some learning communities the counselor was less able to identify problems that manifested themselves in the English and content courses because the faculty team did not meet regularly during the semester.

This kind of variation — which is inevitable in evaluations of real-life programs — has implications for the evaluation. First, as discussed in the next section, it means that results based on only the first cohort of Opening Doors students should be viewed with great caution. Students who entered the program in later semesters may have experienced a more fully implemented version of the model.

Second, as discussed earlier, even if implementation had been perfectly uniform, the evaluation is not designed to disentangle the effects of the different program strategies. The variability in the implementation of these strategies would make the task of disentangling all the more difficult. In an attempt to address the issue, in November 2004, MDRC administered a short survey to students in the Opening Doors group and the control group who had entered the study for the fall 2004 semester. The purpose of the survey was to try to understand the specific ways in which Kingsborough's Opening Doors program is — and is not — different from the regular college environment. The ultimate goal is for these data to help researchers link program implementation with program effects.



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

Over the next several years, thanks to the random assignment research design, the Opening Doors evaluation will be able to produce very reliable information about how the program of each college taking part in the evaluation affects students' academic outcomes and, in the longer term, their performance in the labor market. At this point, it is far too early to draw any firm conclusions about the effects of Kingsborough's Opening Doors program, but MDRC has obtained enough data to identify some early trends.

The results described below are drawn from student transcript data provided to MDRC by Kingsborough. The analysis focuses on the first cohort of nearly 400 students — half in Opening Doors and half in the control group — who entered the study in fall 2003. As of this writing, the available transcript data describe the students' academic performance (for example, courses taken and passed, grades, and credits earned, among other measures) during the program semester (fall 2003 for this cohort) and the first post-program semester (spring 2004). The data also describe the students' registration/enrollment status for the second post-program semester (fall 2004).

### **What Should We Expect to See?**

Kingsborough's Opening Doors program directly affects students for, at most, the first 18 weeks of their college careers (as described earlier, the core elements of the program last for just 12 weeks). And yet, proponents of learning communities believe that this model can generate long-term effects, such as increases in the percentage of students who obtain an associate's or even a bachelor's degree. Is this plausible?

These kinds of long-term impacts are possible if Opening Doors is able to launch students on a different trajectory than they would otherwise take. As discussed earlier, many experts believe that students' academic and social experiences during their first semester of college often determine whether they will persist in school over the long term. According to this theory, students who develop strong initial connections — with other students, with faculty or staff, and with the material they are studying — are far more likely to continue and succeed. In addition, at Kingsborough, students who make good progress toward fulfilling their developmental English requirements during the first semester may be more motivated to continue.

If this underlying theory is correct, one should expect to see Opening Doors students at Kingsborough perform substantially better than their control group counterparts during their first semester. Next, one should see evidence that, after this initial boost, Opening Doors students are more likely to stay in school and continue to make progress in subsequent semesters.

As discussed below, there is strong evidence about the first link in this chain, but the longer-term story is still unclear. This is not surprising, since the results available to date are for a small group of students — only about one-fourth of the total research sample. Large sample sizes are critical in order to obtain statistically reliable results. In addition, the available data cover a short follow-up period and results might well change over time. Finally, as discussed earlier, the students whose data are presented below experienced the Opening Doors program during its startup semester, when it did not operate at peak strength.

## The First Semester

Table 5 shows the performance of Opening Doors study participants during their first two semesters at Kingsborough; as discussed earlier, the results are for students who entered the study in fall 2003. The first column shows outcomes for the Opening Doors group and the second column shows outcomes for the control group. The third column shows the difference in outcomes between the two groups — in other words, the effect of the program. The asterisks are used to designate differences that are statistically significant, which means one can be quite confident that the program really had an effect on that outcome.

The top panel of the table shows results for the students' first semester (fall 2003), when the Opening Doors group members were in the program. The first row shows that the vast majority of students in both groups registered for at least one course during the semester. This is not surprising, because students entered the study shortly before they registered for classes. In this context, however, being “registered” for a course means that the student was still enrolled on the date when Kingsborough conducted its official census, roughly a month after the start of the semester. Thus, between 10 percent and 15 percent of the students in each group either never showed up for class or withdrew very quickly, perhaps because their plans changed or because they were deemed ineligible for financial aid.

Not surprisingly, Opening Doors students were substantially more likely to register for an English course. Overall, 84 percent of Opening Doors students and 69 percent of control group students took English. (These percentages include students who took no courses; among those who registered for at least one course, 96 percent of Opening Doors students and 80 percent of control group students took English — see Appendix Table A.1).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>The numbers in Appendix Table A.1, which show results for students who took courses in fall 2003, may be more meaningful to a college administrator than those shown in Table 5, which include all students in the study. However, the appendix results should be viewed with caution because it is not possible to say with certainty that the differences between groups in Appendix Table A.1 are attributable to the program. It is possible (though unlikely) that enrolled students in the Opening Doors group differed in some systematic way from enrolled students in the control group. (This is known as a nonexperimental comparison.)

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 5**

**Academic Performance for All Students in the Kingsborough  
Community College Fall 2003 Cohort, by Semester in the First Year**

	Opening Doors Group	Control Group	Impact of Opening Doors	
<b><u>Opening Doors semester</u></b>				
Registered for any courses (%)	88.0	86.2	1.9	
Took one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	84.4	69.2	15.1	***
Developmental English	60.4	49.2	11.2	**
Credit English	26.0	22.6	3.5	
Passed one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	60.9	41.0	19.9	***
Developmental English	39.6	23.6	16.0	***
Credit English	22.9	20.0	2.9	
Took student development course (%)	79.7	23.1	56.6	***
Passed student development course (%)	74.5	17.9	56.5	***
Percent of attempted courses passed <sup>b</sup>	79.3	71.2	8.1	**
Number of courses passed	3.7	3.1	0.5	**
Credits earned (regular + equated) <sup>c</sup>	11.6	10.1	1.4	*
Regular credits	7.7	7.8	-0.1	
Equated credits	3.9	2.4	1.5	***
<b><u>First semester after Opening Doors</u></b>				
Registered for any courses (%)	76.0	72.3	3.7	
Took one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	62.5	52.3	10.2	**
Developmental English	24.0	21.5	2.4	
Credit English	40.1	32.3	7.8	
Passed one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	40.1	36.4	3.7	
Developmental English	12.5	11.3	1.2	
Credit English	29.2	26.7	2.5	
Took student development course (%)	3.1	3.1	0.0	
Passed student development course (%)	2.1	2.1	0.0	
Percent of attempted courses passed <sup>b</sup>	67.2	69.7	-2.5	
Number of courses passed	2.6	2.4	0.2	
Credits earned (regular + equated) <sup>c</sup>	8.4	8.0	0.4	
Regular credits	7.4	6.9	0.5	
Equated credits	1.0	1.1	-0.1	
Sample size	192	195		

(continued)

### Table 5 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 387 sample members who are in the Fall 2003 cohort, including those who did not register for any classes.

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.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

<sup>a</sup>A semester is comprised of two modules. In some cases, students took an English course in each module, resulting in two English courses for one semester.

<sup>b</sup>This outcome is only calculated for sample members who attempted one or more courses.

<sup>c</sup>Equated credits are weekly class hours in developmental and compensatory courses for which actual credit is not allowed. For certain purposes, such as determining financial aid eligibility, equated credits may be counted in the same manner as regular credits.

The program's impact on English course registration is driven by Opening Doors students who failed one or both of the English skills assessment tests and were placed into developmental courses. As discussed earlier, Opening Doors students are essentially forced to take English (at whatever level they are placed), while control group students who tested into developmental courses could (and, apparently, in some cases, did) avoid taking those courses — probably to their long-term detriment.

Of course, achieving an increase in English-course registration does not necessarily require a learning community structure; the college could simply mandate that students take English during their first semester. Thus, even more encouraging is the fact that Opening Doors students were also much more likely to *pass* developmental English. Just under 40 percent of Opening Doors students passed a developmental English course during the semester, compared with about 24 percent of control group students. Among students who took a developmental English course, about 66 percent of the Opening Doors students passed a course, compared to a pass rate of 48 percent for control group students (not shown in the table).

One might argue that course-grading standards could be different in Opening Doors, but this is unlikely to explain the difference in pass rates. In most developmental English courses, the grade is heavily determined by the students' performance on a portfolio that is graded by a neutral faculty member. Moreover, as discussed below, there is evidence that the Opening Doors students' completion of developmental English courses is translating into higher pass rates on the CUNY reading and writing skills tests, an objective measure of achievement.

Overall, when compared with control group students, Opening Doors students were more likely to pass their courses, and they passed a large number of total courses. As a result, despite being much more likely to take noncredit developmental courses, Opening Doors students earned

as many regular credits as did control group students. Also, though not shown in the table, Opening Doors students were less likely than their control group counterparts to receive a grade of “WU,” indicating that they stopped attending a course before the end of the semester.

Appendix Table A.2 shows first semester results for all students who entered the study in spring 2004 — the second cohort of Opening Doors students. (Appendix Table A.3 shows the same results for only the students who registered for courses.) As mentioned earlier, this cohort experienced an unusual program treatment, since many of their class sections were quite small. Nevertheless, the first semester results for this cohort are similar to the results for the fall 2003 cohort shown in Table 5.<sup>49</sup>

## After Opening Doors

The bottom panel of Table 5 shows how the students fared during their second semester at Kingsborough — the first post-program semester for the Opening Doors group (spring 2004). These results show a far different pattern. Apart from being somewhat more likely to take an English course, Opening Doors students generally performed at the same level as control group students. There were no significant differences in course pass rates or credits earned. In essence, Opening Doors students substantially outperformed control group students while in the program, but this pattern did not continue after they left it. However, this does not erase the gains that Opening Doors students accumulated during their time in the program (discussed further below).

Interestingly, the retention, or persistence, rate was quite high for both groups. Overall, 76 percent of Opening Doors students and 72 percent of control students were enrolled in the second semester, a difference that is not statistically significant. Among students who registered for courses in the first semester, more than 80 percent of each group returned for the following semester (see Appendix Table A.1) — and there was no significant difference between the groups in this regard. In other words, Opening Doors did not lead to an increase in persistence from the first semester to the second, although the high rate for the control group left relatively little room for improvement.

## One Year Later

As of this writing, MDRC has obtained course registration information for the fall 2004 semester (the second post-program semester for the students who entered the study in fall

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<sup>49</sup>Appendix Table A.2 shows that, in spring 2004, Opening Doors students were significantly more likely than control group students to register for any courses. MDRC is exploring possible explanations for this surprising pattern.

2003), but it is too early to report on grades and credits earned during that semester. Thus, the available data allow for a summary of each student's first-year academic performance.

Figure 4 shows that, overall, Opening Doors and control group students earned about the same number of academic credits at Kingsborough during their first academic year (the averages include all students in both groups, including those who never enrolled or who left after one semester). This is not surprising, since the average number of credits earned was about the same for the two groups in both of the semesters shown in Table 5. As noted earlier, this can be seen as a positive result: Opening Doors students managed to keep up with the control group in earning academic credits despite taking (and passing) more noncredit developmental English courses.

The most encouraging news is that the increase in completion of developmental English courses discussed earlier has started to pay off. As shown previously in Table 4, only about 24 percent of the students in each group had passed both the reading and writing skills tests at the point of enrollment. Figure 5 shows that, one year later, 62 percent of Opening Doors students had passed both tests, compared to 52 percent of control group students, a difference that is statistically significant. As expected, the difference was particularly pronounced for students who failed both the reading and writing tests before enrollment. The right-hand panel of Figure 5 shows that 34 percent of Opening Doors students in this subgroup had passed both tests one year later, compared to just 15 percent of control group students. As discussed earlier, students must pass certain developmental courses before they are allowed to retake the tests.<sup>50</sup>

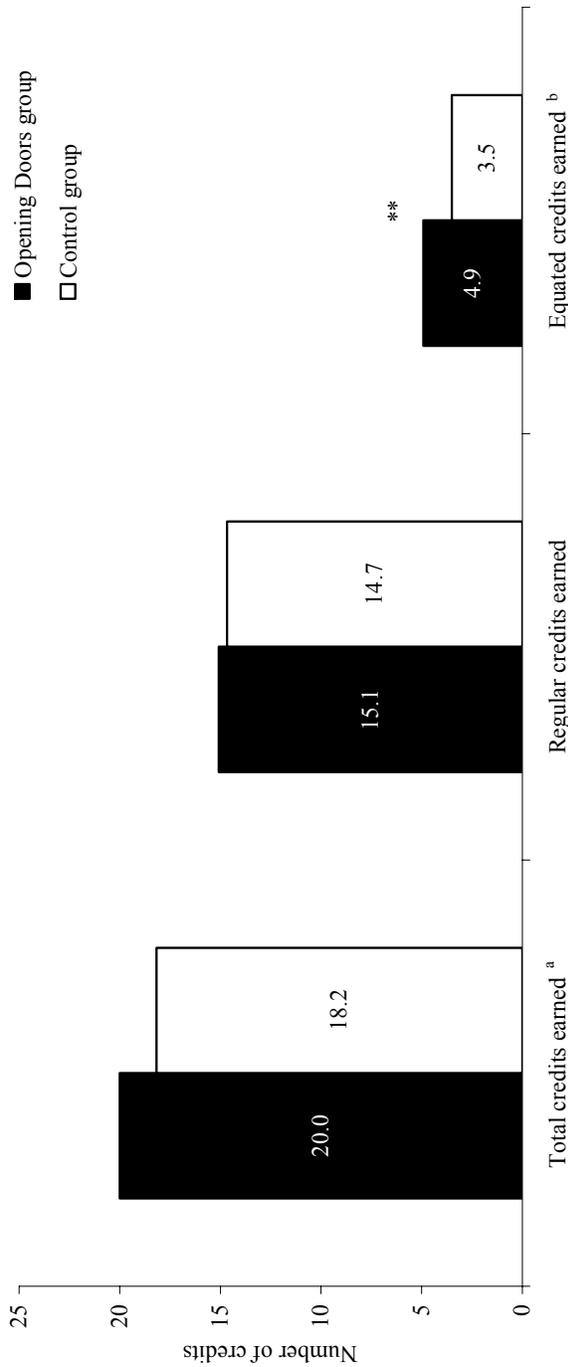
As discussed earlier, most Kingsborough students must pass two credit-bearing freshman English courses in order to obtain a degree. Because students cannot take these courses until they have passed both the reading and writing skills tests, the positive effects on test completion have put Opening Doors students in a better position to complete the English degree requirements. Figure 6 illustrates this point by dividing the students into four mutually exclusive categories based on their English status one year after entering the study. By adding together the first three sets of bars, one can see that 52 percent of Opening Doors students had either completed one or both of the required credit-bearing English courses or were enrolled in one of those courses in spring 2004. The corresponding figure for the control group was 42 percent and, once again, the difference is statistically significant.

Given that Opening Doors students are making significantly faster progress in English, it is surprising that they were no more likely than control group students to be enrolled at Kingsborough in fall 2004 (the second post-program semester). As shown in Figure 7, only a little over half of each group was still enrolled at that point. MDRC also obtained data on enrollment

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<sup>50</sup>At this point, MDRC does not have data on students who retested and failed. Thus, it is not possible to calculate the pass rate among those who retested in either group.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**  
**Figure 4**  
**Credits Earned During First Academic Year, Kingsborough Community College Fall 2003 Cohort**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 387 sample members who are in the Fall 2003 cohort.

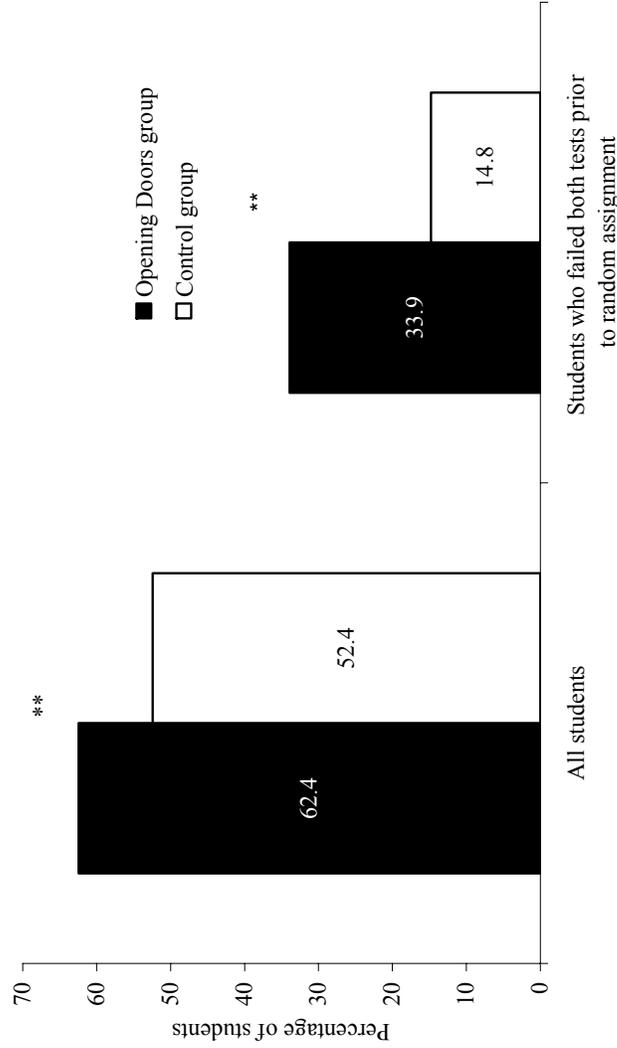
A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between the research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as \*\*\* = 1 percent, \*\* = 5 percent, and \* = 10 percent.

<sup>a</sup> Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

<sup>b</sup> Total credits earned is the sum of regular credits earned and equated credits earned.

<sup>c</sup> Equated credits are weekly class hours in developmental and compensatory courses for which actual credit is not allowed. For certain purposes, such as determining financial aid eligibility, equated credits may be counted in the same manner as regular credits.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**  
**Figure 5**  
**Percentage of Students Who Passed Both City University of New York English Skills Assessment Tests After One Year, Kingsborough Community College Fall 2003 Cohort**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 387 sample members who are in the Fall 2003 cohort.

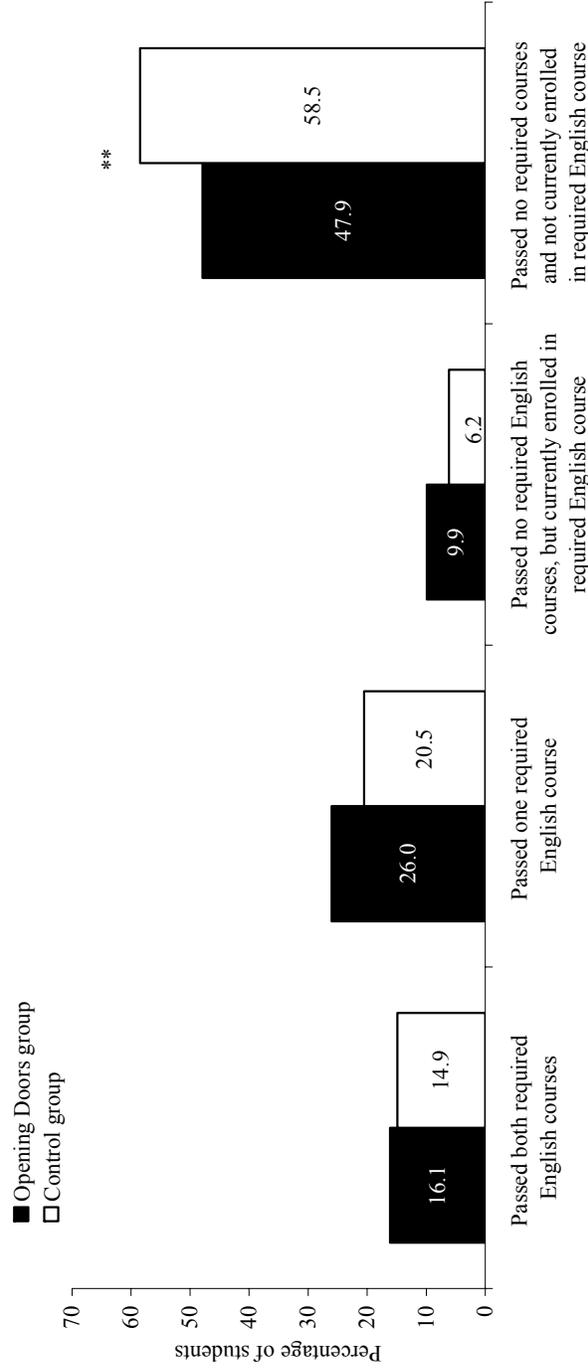
A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between the research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as \*\*\* = 1 percent, \*\* = 5 percent, and \* = 10 percent.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure 6

Status of Students' English Placement After One Year, Kingsborough Community College Fall 2003 Cohort



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 387 sample members who are in the Fall 2003 cohort.

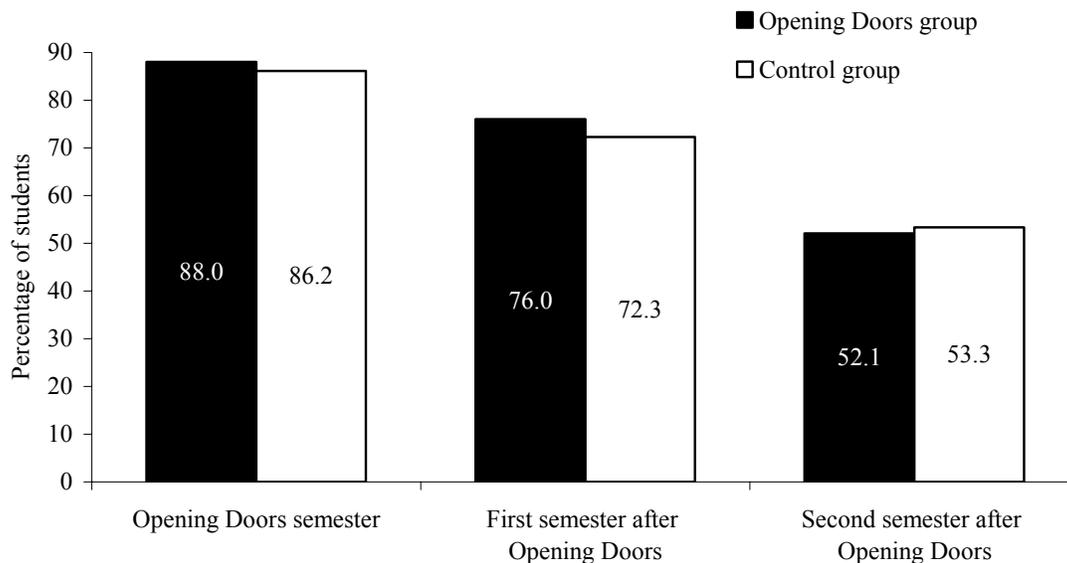
A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between the research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as \*\*\* = 1 percent, \*\* = 5 percent, and \* = 10 percent.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure 7

### Enrollment at Kingsborough Community College, Fall 2003 Cohort



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 387 sample members who are in the Fall 2003 cohort.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

in other CUNY colleges during fall 2004, but these data do not change the story. The rate of overall CUNY enrollment — that is, enrollment at Kingsborough or another CUNY college — is just under 60 percent for each group. Eventually, survey data will shed light on transfers outside the CUNY system.

On the positive side, the Opening Doors students who were still enrolled at Kingsborough in fall 2004 were further along than the control group students who were still enrolled. For example, among those enrolled in fall 2004, 78 percent of Opening Doors group members had either passed a credit-bearing English course or were enrolled in one, compared with 63 of control group students (not shown).

Finally, it is worth noting that the program has had no effect on the percentage of students who have passed the CUNY skills test in math. This is not surprising because Opening Doors does not include a formal math component, but the math skills test could serve as a barrier to further progress for some Opening Doors students. One year after enrollment, about one-third of the students in each research group still had not passed the math exam. Opening Doors students are slightly more likely to have taken developmental math courses, but the difference is not statistically significant.

## **What Do the Results Mean?**

It is far too early to pass judgment on Kingsborough's Opening Doors Learning Communities program. At this point, only short-term follow-up data are available for a relatively small fraction of the study participants.

Nevertheless, it seems fairly clear that the Opening Doors program can substantially improve student performance during the period when students are directly affected by the program. Opening Doors students are both more likely to take critical developmental courses — and more likely to pass those courses — than their control group counterparts. The very similar results for students in the first two study cohorts inspire greater confidence in this result.

The program's longer-term effects are much less clear. It certainly appears that the Opening Doors program at Kingsborough is giving students a boost and helping them progress more quickly through their English requirements. However, so far, there is no evidence that the program is keeping students in college longer. There is no way to know whether this result will hold up over time, since students often stop out of school — or transfer elsewhere — later. As a result, it is also too early to assess the validity of the underlying theory about the link between first-semester experiences and later student retention.

In any case, it is important to note that, even if no effects on student retention emerge, the Opening Doors program could still generate increases in degree receipt, transfer, and other longer-term outcomes, since the Opening Doors students who are still enrolled are further along than the enrolled control group members.

MDRC will be tracking the results for these students — and the other three cohorts of Kingsborough study participants — for several more years and will report results as they emerge.



## Epilogue

The qualitative experiences of the six students described in detail in this report are helpful in interpreting the quantitative data. One year later, three of the six were still at Kingsborough. Gilda, the Ecuadorian immigrant, managed to pass the CUNY writing test in the summer of 2004 — on her fourth try — and was finally enrolled in a credit-bearing freshman English class in fall 2004. She was also beginning to tackle developmental math and moving steadily toward her goal of becoming a social worker. She was taking two mental health courses and about to start an internship at a local nursing home.

Steven and Amina were also still at Kingsborough. Steven developed a strong connection with the Kingsborough theater program during his second semester, and had worked as assistant stage manager in a student production. By fall 2004, he had passed the CUNY English tests and was enrolled in a credit-bearing freshman English class. Amina was pursuing her dream of becoming a doctor: She was enrolled in math and science courses but had not yet passed the CUNY writing test.

Sharon had a less positive experience at Kingsborough. Although she enjoyed several of her courses — including art history, psychology, and acting — the CUNY skills test proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. After passing two developmental English courses, she retested and, in a very unusual pattern, passed the writing test but failed the reading test. Frustrated, both she and her boyfriend left Kingsborough and enrolled in a for-profit college that focuses on business and health careers, where she was studying to be a medical assistant. She still hoped to become a nurse someday, but decided to aim for a more reachable goal in the short term.

David, the student from the Hasidic family, had made remarkable progress. Although working steadily at night — and, at times, taking naps in his car between school and work — he had managed to complete both his developmental English and math requirements, pass all three CUNY skills tests, and transfer to Brooklyn College. He was finding the work there extremely challenging but was confident he would succeed.

Joseph's story is not clear. He performed extremely well during the first 12-week module and returned for the subsequent 6-week module. At that point, in early 2004, he was struggling to decide whether to stay on the computer science track or, at his mother's urging, switch to nursing. Unfortunately, he then lost contact with the researchers. He was not enrolled at Kingsborough in fall 2004, but the reasons are unknown.



## **Appendix A**

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

### Appendix Table A.1

#### Academic Performance for Students in the Kingsborough Community College Fall 2003 Cohort Who Registered for Courses, by Semester in the First Year

	Opening Doors Group	Control Group	Difference
<b><u>Opening Doors semester</u></b>			
Registered for any courses (%)	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>0.0</i>
Took 1 or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	<i>95.9</i>	<i>80.4</i>	<i>15.5</i>
Developmental English	<i>68.6</i>	<i>57.1</i>	<i>11.5</i>
Credit English	<i>29.6</i>	<i>26.2</i>	<i>3.4</i>
Passed 1 or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	<i>69.2</i>	<i>47.6</i>	<i>21.6</i>
Developmental English	<i>45.0</i>	<i>27.4</i>	<i>17.6</i>
Credit English	<i>26.0</i>	<i>23.2</i>	<i>2.8</i>
Took student development course (%)	<i>90.5</i>	<i>26.8</i>	<i>63.7</i>
Passed student development course (%)	<i>84.6</i>	<i>20.8</i>	<i>63.8</i>
Percent of attempted courses passed <sup>b</sup>	<i>79.3</i>	<i>71.2</i>	<i>8.1</i>
Number of courses passed	<i>4.1</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>0.5</i>
Credits earned (regular + equated) <sup>c</sup>	<i>13.2</i>	<i>11.8</i>	<i>1.4</i>
Regular credits	<i>8.8</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>-0.3</i>
Equated credits	<i>4.4</i>	<i>2.7</i>	<i>1.7</i>
<b><u>First semester after Opening Doors</u></b>			
Registered for any courses (%)	<i>84.0</i>	<i>81.0</i>	<i>3.1</i>
Took one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	<i>68.6</i>	<i>58.3</i>	<i>10.3</i>
Developmental English	<i>24.9</i>	<i>23.2</i>	<i>1.6</i>
Credit English	<i>45.6</i>	<i>36.3</i>	<i>9.3</i>
Passed one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	<i>45.0</i>	<i>39.9</i>	<i>5.1</i>
Developmental English	<i>13.6</i>	<i>11.3</i>	<i>2.3</i>
Credit English	<i>33.1</i>	<i>29.8</i>	<i>3.4</i>
Took student development course (%)	<i>1.8</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>-1.8</i>
Passed student development course (%)	<i>1.2</i>	<i>2.4</i>	<i>-1.2</i>
Percent of attempted courses passed <sup>b</sup>	<i>68.1</i>	<i>68.6</i>	<i>-0.5</i>
Number of courses passed	<i>3.0</i>	<i>2.7</i>	<i>0.2</i>
Credits earned (regular + equated) <sup>c</sup>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>8.9</i>	<i>0.6</i>
Regular credits	<i>8.3</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>0.6</i>
Equated credits	<i>1.1</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>0.0</i>
Sample size	<i>169</i>	<i>168</i>	

(continued)

### **Appendix Table A.1 (continued)**

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the sample members in the Fall 2003 cohort who registered for classes in Fall 2003.

Outcomes are shown in italics because they are computed only for sample members who registered for courses and are not true experimental comparisons; statistical tests were not performed.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

<sup>a</sup>A semester is comprised of two modules. In some cases, students took an English course in each module, resulting in two English courses for one semester.

<sup>b</sup>This outcome is only calculated for sample members who attempted one or more courses.

<sup>c</sup>Equated credits are weekly class hours in developmental and compensatory courses for which actual credit is not allowed. For certain purposes, such as determining financial aid eligibility, equated credits may be counted in the same manner as regular credits.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

### Appendix Table A.2

#### Academic Performance for All Students in the Kingsborough Community College Spring 2004 Cohort, Opening Doors Semester

Outcome	Opening Doors Group	Control Group	Impact of Opening Doors	
Registered for any courses (%)	95.9	82.1	13.8	***
Took one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	91.7	70.1	21.7	***
Developmental English	64.5	50.4	14.0	**
Credit English	33.1	22.2	10.8	*
Passed one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	62.8	41.0	21.8	***
Developmental English	41.3	23.9	17.4	***
Credit English	27.3	17.9	9.3	*
Took student development course (%)	90.9	9.4	81.5	***
Passed student development course (%)	80.2	6.8	73.3	***
Percent of attempted courses passed <sup>b</sup>	75.8	67.1	8.7	*
Number of courses passed	3.8	2.5	1.3	***
Credits earned (regular + equated)	11.5	8.6	2.9	***
Regular credits	8.4	6.1	2.3	***
Equated credits <sup>c</sup>	3.1	2.5	0.6	
Registered for any courses in first post-program semester (%)	79.3	65.0	14.4	**
Sample size	121	117		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the sample members in the Spring 2004 cohort, including those who did not register for any classes.

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.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

<sup>a</sup>A semester is comprised of two modules. In some cases, students took an English course in each module, resulting in two English courses for one semester.

<sup>b</sup>This outcome is only calculated for sample members who attempted one or more courses.

<sup>c</sup>Equated credits are weekly class hours in developmental and compensatory courses for which actual credit is not allowed. For certain purposes, such as determining financial aid eligibility, equated credits may be counted in the same manner as regular credits.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Appendix Table A.3**

**Academic Performance for Students in the Kingsborough Community College  
Spring 2004 Cohort Who Registered for Courses, Opening Doors Semester**

	Opening Doors Group	Control Group	Difference
Registered for any courses (%)	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>0.0</i>
Took one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	<i>95.7</i>	<i>85.4</i>	<i>10.3</i>
Developmental English	<i>67.2</i>	<i>61.5</i>	<i>5.8</i>
Credit English	<i>34.5</i>	<i>27.1</i>	<i>7.4</i>
Passed one or more English courses (%) <sup>a</sup>	<i>65.5</i>	<i>50.0</i>	<i>15.5</i>
Developmental English	<i>43.1</i>	<i>29.2</i>	<i>13.9</i>
Credit English	<i>28.4</i>	<i>21.9</i>	<i>6.6</i>
Took student development course (%)	<i>94.8</i>	<i>11.5</i>	<i>83.4</i>
Passed student development course (%)	<i>83.6</i>	<i>8.3</i>	<i>75.3</i>
Percent of attempted courses passed <sup>b</sup>	<i>75.8</i>	<i>67.1</i>	<i>8.7</i>
Number of courses passed	<i>4.0</i>	<i>3.0</i>	<i>0.9</i>
Credits earned (regular + equated)	<i>12.0</i>	<i>10.4</i>	<i>1.5</i>
Regular credits	<i>8.8</i>	<i>7.4</i>	<i>1.3</i>
Equated credits <sup>c</sup>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>3.0</i>	<i>0.2</i>
Registered for any courses in first post-program semester (%)	<i>81.0</i>	<i>75.0</i>	<i>6.0</i>
Sample size	116	96	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Kingsborough Community College transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the sample members in the Spring 2004 cohort who registered for classes in spring 2004.

Outcomes are shown in italics because they are computed only for sample members who registered for courses and are not true experimental comparisons; statistical tests were not performed.

Actual sample sizes for individual measures may vary due to missing data.

<sup>a</sup>A semester is comprised of two modules. In some cases, students took an English course in each module, resulting in two English courses for one semester.

<sup>b</sup>This outcome is only calculated for sample members who attempted one or more courses.

<sup>c</sup>Equated credits are weekly class hours in developmental and compensatory courses for which actual credit is not allowed. For certain purposes, such as determining financial aid eligibility, equated credits may be counted in the same manner as regular credits.



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MDRC's current projects focus on welfare and economic security, education, and employment and community initiatives. Complementing our evaluations of a wide range of welfare reforms are new studies of supports for the working poor and emerging analyses of how programs affect children's development and their families' well-being. In the field of education, we are testing reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools, especially in urban areas. Finally, our community projects are using innovative approaches to increase employment in low-income neighborhoods.

Our projects are a mix of demonstrations — field tests of promising program models — and evaluations of government and community initiatives, and we employ a wide range of methods to determine a program's effects, including large-scale studies, surveys, case studies, and ethnographies of individuals and families. We share the findings and lessons from our work — including best practices for program operators — with a broad audience within the policy and practitioner community, as well as the general public and the media.

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