Community College Interventions for Low-Wage Workers: Lessons from the Opening Doors Demonstration

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Why Focus on Community Colleges?

The Benefits:
- Adults with some college or an A.A. degree earn 12 percent more than high school graduates and 66 percent more than high school dropouts.
- Adults with an A.A. less likely to be unemployed or in poverty.
- Better health, greater civic participation, children better prepared for school.

The Problem: Many Students Do Not Persist
- Nearly half of all students who begin at community college do not complete a degree or transfer within 6 years.

Major obstacles:
- Competing work and/or family obligations
- Not academically prepared
- Affordability (both real and perceived)
Opening Doors: A Demonstration Project of Strategies to Help Community College Students Succeed

Three broad strategies:

• Instructional reforms
• Enhanced student services
• Increased financial support

Desired outcomes:

• Improved academic performance
• Increased persistence
• Higher rates of certificate and degree completion
• Improved employment outcomes
Opening Doors Sites and Program Strategies

Enhanced Student Services: Lorain County and Owens Community Colleges (OH)

Student Success Course and Basic Skills Instruction: Chaffey College (CA)

Performance-Based Scholarship: Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College – West Jefferson (LA)

Learning Communities: Kingsborough Community College (NY)
Random Assignment Used to Measure Program Effects

Targeted students invited to participate in study

Students give consent

Baseline data collected

Random assignment

Program group Enrolled in Opening Doors programs

Control group Received regular courses and services
Ohio: Enhanced Student Services

- Students assigned to a program counselor who served as their advocate and advisor
  - Low caseloads: maximum of 185 students (vs. 1,000 for control group)
  - Stipends of $150 offered for each of two semesters, paid after meetings with counselor
- Proactive, team-oriented approach:
  - Referrals to and follow-up with other student services staff, including financial aid staff.
- Program delivered services as intended:
  - On average, program group had 9 contacts with counselor during two-semester program.
  - 90 percent of program group received stipend payments, half received full $300.
Ohio: Sample Characteristics (n = 2139)

Target group:
- Incoming freshmen and continuing students who completed fewer than 13 credits, and had history of academic difficulties
- Family income below 250 percent of federal poverty level

Key Characteristics:
- Women: 75%
- Average age: 24
- Race/Ethnicity
  - White: 54%
  - Black and Hispanic: 41%
- Employed at baseline: 56%
- Receiving any public benefits: 48%
Ohio: Positive Effects on College Enrollment while Enhanced Services Were Delivered, but No Enduring Effect
Students received $1,000 for two semesters ($2,000 total) on two conditions:
- Enroll at least half-time
- Maintain “C” or better average

Scholarship paid in increments:
- $250 on enrollment
- $250 on passing midterms
- $500 on passing courses

Program counselors monitored academic progress and disbursed payments

Program delivered scholarships as intended:
- 90 percent of program group received at least one scholarship payment
- Average amount received: $1,133
Louisiana: Participating Students (n = 1019)

Target group:
  – Low-income parents

Key Characteristics:
  • Women: 92%
  • Average age: 25
  • Race/Ethnicity
    o Black: 85%
    o White: 11%
  • Employed at baseline: 52%
  • Receiving any public benefits: 71%
Louisiana: Positive Effects on College Enrollment

Percent registered for any course

- **1st Semester**: Program Group (70%) > Control Group (60%)
- **2nd Semester**: Program Group (60%) > Control Group (40%)
- **3rd Semester**: Program Group (80%) > Control Group (60%)
- **4th Semester**: Program Group (50%) > Control Group (30%)

Significance levels: *** (p < 0.001), ** (p < 0.01), * (p < 0.05)
Louisiana: Positive Effects on Credit Accumulation

![Chart showing the comparison between Program Group and Control Group across different semesters and periods (1-4 and 1-7). The chart indicates significant positive effects on credit accumulation, marked with *** for Program Group and ** for Control Group in the 3rd Semester.](chart.png)
Conclusions

• Interventions for low-wage workers attending community college can make a difference in academic outcomes

• Enhanced student services help, but may need to be ongoing
  • Short-term intervention yields short-term results.

• Performance-Based Scholarships appear to have a larger positive effect and make a lasting difference, even after scholarships end

• Many funding sources can be tapped to provide these supports: WIA, TANF, private sources, American Graduation Initiative (if passed by Congress)
Opening Doors Funders

U.S. Department of Labor
U.S. Department of Education
National Institutes of Health

Lumina Foundation for Education
Ford Foundation
Robin Hood Foundation
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
James Irvine Foundation
Knowledgeworks Foundation

MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health
MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health
MacArthur Foundation Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood
Annie E. Casey Foundation
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Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
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