



Higher Education

Policy Agenda

- >> Overview
- >> Community Colleges

Policy Area Resources

- >> Staff
- >> Advisory Committee
- >> Publications

Special Series

- >> Press Releases
- >> Fast Fact Archive
- >> Policy Briefs
- >> Policy and Research Recommendations
- >> Issue Focus Archive
- >> Video Archive
- >> How-To Guides
- >> Working Papers on Research Methodology

Issue Focus

Updates

RSS

Share

E-mail

Print

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Can Improved Student Services Boost Community College Student Success?

"Student services" refers to the broad range of supports that community colleges provide to help students navigate through college successfully, including academic counseling and tutoring. Unfortunately, many students do not get the help they need, either because college staff are overburdened or students do not know how to access the services that are available (or both). In community colleges, counselor-to-student ratios of 1 to 1,000 are not uncommon. A national survey of entering community college students found that 32 percent did not attend a freshmen orientation program and half did not meet with or recall seeing an academic adviser during their first four weeks of college.

MDRC has recently conducted several studies that examine innovative strategies for improving the delivery of student services to community college students. While there are no "silver bullets," the research suggests that there are enhancements that can lead to better use of student services and – more important – lead to improvements in academic outcomes.

Bringing Student Services into the Classroom: A "Light-Touch" Intervention

At South Texas College, a participant in Lumina Foundation for Education's **Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count** initiative, college leaders designed a "light touch" intervention targeting students enrolled in lower-level math courses that have high rates of failure. The program, called Beacon Mentoring, recruited and trained college employees to make several short classroom presentations to math classes about student services available on campus and to work with the faculty to identify struggling students and offer them help early on. The program was based on three simple ideas: that students who need existing services often do not access them; that student services staff need to be alerted when students start to fail in class; and that students need a "go to" person on campus.

MDRC's **random assignment study** finds that the Beacon Mentoring program increased the number of students who used South Texas College's Center for Learning Excellence, a campus resource that provides tutoring and other forms of academic support. While the program has not improved math class pass rates or persistence in college overall, it benefited two subgroups at particular risk of failure: (1) part-time students were less likely to withdraw from and more likely to pass the math class, earned more credits, and, at least in the developmental math classes, scored higher on the final exam, and (2) developmental student were less likely to withdraw from math class than students in the control group, and they earned more credits in their non-math developmental courses.

Helping Students on Probation Get Back in Good Standing

Many community colleges have developed "College Success" courses to help students learn about college policies and expectations, acquire time management skills, address test-taking anxiety and other psychological barriers, and become familiar with tutoring centers and other campus resources. At Chaffey College in California, **MDRC evaluated** a College Success course designed for students who were on probation because of poor grades or an excessive number of course withdrawals. The course was taught by a college counselor and required students to make use of the college's "Success Centers," where they could get help from instructors or tutors in reading, writing, or math.

The Chaffey program went through two iterations. In its first year, the program was voluntary, and only about half the students who were assigned to the program group enrolled in the College Success class. Perhaps not surprisingly, the evaluation of this program showed no measurable effects. As a result, administrators and staff revamped the intervention, making it a two-semester, mandatory program. The effects of the mandatory program after two semesters were large and significant. Students in the program group earned an average of 8.3 college credits, compared with an average of 5.6 credits for students in the control group. And almost twice as many students in the program group as in the control group got off probation and returned to good academic standing. MDRC will continue to collect longer follow-up data to determine whether the effects from the second-year program translate into increased persistence and degree completion at Chaffey.

Integrating Student Services into Learning Communities

Another popular idea on community college campuses is to create "learning communities" in which students enroll together in two or more courses that are linked thematically and share assignments. Kingsborough Community College in New York created a learning

community that enrolled incoming freshmen and comprised three linked courses: an English course, usually taught at the developmental level; a standard college course, such as sociology or health; and a College Success course taught by a counselor. Students in the learning communities also received enhanced tutoring and a voucher to help pay for their books. **MDRC evaluated the Kingsborough program** using a random assignment research design. The study found that the program led to significant, positive results on the number of credits students earned during the first semester of college. The program also moved students more quickly through developmental English requirements.

In part because of the promising results from Kingsborough, MDRC and its research partners at the National Center for Postsecondary Research have launched a **National Learning Communities Demonstration**. Several of the colleges in this random assignment study are linking a College Success course with developmental English or math courses; some also involve additional tutoring. A report on program implementation will be released in March 2010; findings on program effectiveness will be released later in the year.

Finally, the James Irvine Foundation funded an initiative called **Student Support Services Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE)** at nine California community colleges. The goal of the initiative was to help colleges develop ways to break down the "silos" that often exist between the instructional and student services divisions of community colleges. Five of the SSPIRE colleges developed strategies to integrate student services into learning communities. In some colleges, counselors "dropped in" on traditional classes to talk with students and inform them of available services; in other colleges, counselors taught versions of College Success courses.

Lowering the Counselor-Student Ratio

Lorain County Community College and Owens Community College in Ohio worked with MDRC to test the effectiveness of an enhanced counseling and advising program targeted to beginning freshmen and continuing students who had completed fewer than thirteen credits. One of the goals of the program was to lower the number of students that counselors were expected to serve to about 160, as opposed to the conventional caseloads of roughly 1,000, in order to encourage more personalized and intensive guidance. The program also incentivized students to follow through on counseling appointments by paying them a modest stipend of \$150 if they completed at least two counselor visits a semester. The enhanced counseling and advising — and the stipends — lasted two semesters.

MDRC's random assignment evaluation showed that the Ohio program increased the amount of counseling that students received. For example, almost two-thirds of the program group reported having at least three academic advising sessions during their first year in the study, compared with only 40 percent of the control group. The study also found that the program led to a modest increase in college enrollment after one semester in the program, though the effect went away as soon as the more intensive services ended. There was no effect on other key indicators of academic performance, such as credits earned. The findings suggest that lowered counselor-student ratios and modest stipends tied to counselor visits may not be enough to change students' pathways, though it is possible that students would have derived more benefit if the program had a longer duration than two semesters.

Conclusion

Collectively, these studies indicate that there are a variety of ways community colleges can enhance the delivery of student services. A common thread among the more effective programs at South Texas College, Chaffey College, and Kingsborough Community College is that they get counselors and advisers into classrooms — either to support developmental math instructors or to teach College Success courses. Classroom-based interventions may have the advantage of reaching students who otherwise would not seek out help. They may also be a more efficient means of enhancing student services than a model predicated on many individual appointments between students and counselors.

MDRC is continuing to do more research on strategies to improve student services delivery. For example, some of the sites in the **Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration** are linking enhanced counseling with additional financial support. MDRC is also studying the effectiveness of a College Success course at Guilford Technical College in North Carolina, an Achieving the Dream college.