Supporting Low-income Students in Community College: The Opening Doors Project

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Strategies for Improving Economic Mobility of Workers Conference

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Benefits of Community Colleges

- Affordable, accessible institutions

- Offer programs to address a wide range of student needs and interests
  - Developmental and English as a Second Language instruction
  - Occupational certificates and degrees
  - Traditional academic programs leading to Associate’s degrees and transfer to four-year colleges and universities

- Community college degrees lead to better quality jobs and higher wages
Community Colleges and TANF

- Several evaluations of the effectiveness of education versus work first in welfare reform context
- Lessons:
  - Mixed findings
  - Difficult to combine work assignments with education
  - Post-employment programs to support education and training have had little take-up
- Relatively few current or former welfare recipients who begin college classes end up completing a certificate or degree
Low-wage workers’ Experiences in Community College Are Not Unusual

- Nearly half of students who begin at community college do not earn a degree and are not enrolled in any institution 6 years later. Why?
  - Not everyone wants a degree (but most do)
  - Poor academic preparation
  - Competing demands of work, family, school
  - Students feel unsupported on campus
  - Difficulty paying for school
Opening Doors: Programs Designed to Increase Persistence & Achievement

- **Program strategies:**
  - Strengthened developmental instruction
  - Improved guidance and support services
  - Increased financial aid

- **Desired results:**
  - Increased course completion and persistence
  - Higher rates of graduation or transfer
  - Increased employment and better jobs
Students in Opening Doors assigned to an academic advisor with a maximum caseload of 150 (vs. 1000)

Proactive, team-oriented counseling approach:
- Minimum 2 meetings with students each semester
- Referrals to and follow-up with other student services staff
- Evening hours

$150 scholarship for each of two semesters, tied to meetings with the academic advisor
Scholarship tied to academic performance (Louisiana)

- $1,000 on top of regular financial aid for two semesters, paid in increments:
  - $250 on enrollment
  - $250 on passing midterms
  - $500 on passing courses

- Opening Doors counselors monitored academic performance and disbursed payments to students

- Counselors maintained caseloads of 125 students
Evaluation Is Using an Experimental Research Design

Eligible Students Told about the Study

Baseline Data Collected

Random Assignment

Opening Doors intervention

Comparison Group (status quo)
### Characteristics of Opening Doors Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Ohio sites</th>
<th>Louisiana sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially dependent on parents</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed (at RA)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Selected Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lorain Impact</th>
<th>Owens Impact</th>
<th>LA Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Registration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First semester</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second semester</td>
<td>5.6**</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>18.2 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third semester</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>11.2 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of courses passed</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>First semester</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.4 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second semester</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.4 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total credits earned</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First semester</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.1 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second semester</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.2 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cumulative Program Impacts after Three Semesters in Louisiana

- Bar graph showing Total semesters enrolled vs. Total Credits Earned for Program Group and Comparison Group.
- Green bar represents Program Group; yellow bar represents Comparison Group.
- Significance indicated by "***" on graph.
Conclusions

- Benefits of collaboration between Workforce, Employers and Community College Systems

- Scholarship based on academic performance is workable and seems to lead to large, positive effects
  - Academic achievement
  - Retention in college
Future Work

- 12-month reports in 2008
- Replication of incentive scholarship