



Executive Summary

OPENING DOORS

SERVING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ON PROBATION

Four-Year Findings from Chaffey College's
Opening Doors Program

Michael Weiss
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November 2011

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Overview

Community colleges across the United States face a difficult challenge. On the one hand, they are “open access” institutions, with a mission to serve students from all backgrounds and at varying levels of college readiness. On the other hand, they must uphold high academic standards in order to maintain accreditation and prepare students for employment or transfer to four-year schools. How, then, can community colleges best serve students who want to learn but do not meet minimum academic standards?

Chaffey College, a large community college located about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, began to wrestle with this question early in the twenty-first century. Under the auspices of a national demonstration project called Opening Doors, Chaffey developed a program designed to increase probationary students’ chances of succeeding in college. Chaffey’s program included a “College Success” course, taught by a counselor, which provided basic information on study skills and the requirements of college. As part of the course, students were expected to complete five visits to “Success Centers,” where their assignments, linked to the College Success course, covered skills assessment, learning styles, time management, use of resources, and test preparation.

In 2005, MDRC collaborated with Chaffey College to evaluate the one-semester, voluntary Opening Doors program. In 2006, the program was improved to form the two-semester Enhanced Opening Doors program, in which probationary students were told that they were required to take the College Success course. In MDRC’s evaluation of each program, students were randomly assigned either to a program group that had the opportunity to participate in the program or to a control group that received the college’s standard courses and services. This report presents the outcomes for both groups of students in the Enhanced Opening Doors evaluation for four years after they entered the study. The findings include:

- **The message matters — optional program activities had lower participation rates compared with required program activities.**
- **Chaffey’s Enhanced Opening Doors program had positive short-term effects.** When the two program semesters were complete, students in the program group had earned more credits than students in the control group and were nearly twice as likely as control group students to be in good academic standing.
- **Despite the program’s encouraging short-term effects, it did not meaningfully improve students’ long-term academic outcomes.** Four years after the study began, program and control group students had made similar academic progress. Strikingly, during that time, only 7 percent of *all* students in the study had earned a degree or certificate.

This report presents detailed findings from Chaffey’s Enhanced Opening Doors initiative, including the cost and cost-effectiveness of the program, and considers the implications of this research for designing services for probationary students in community college.

Preface

Like many community colleges, Chaffey College enrolls large numbers of students who struggle academically and are eventually placed on probation for their poor academic performance. Many of these students ultimately leave college without earning a credential. “College Success” courses, which teach students the skills they need to navigate their way successfully through school, are one popular strategy used on numerous college campuses to improve students’ chances of succeeding after being placed on academic probation.

Through a national demonstration project called Opening Doors, Chaffey’s leaders developed a program designed to increase probationary students’ chances of succeeding. The key feature of the program is a three-credit College Success course, which is taught by a college counselor. As part of the course, students are expected to visit the college’s “Success Centers,” where individualized and group instruction in math, reading, and writing is available.

This report describes Chaffey’s program and its effects on students’ academic outcomes four years after students entered the program. This random assignment experimental study found that during the two semesters when students were eligible to participate in the program, they earned more credits, had a higher grade point average, and were more likely to be in good academic standing than students in a control group who did not participate in the program. Most of these findings, though, were a result of the credits earned in the College Success course, credits that are not applicable toward a degree and cannot be transferred to another institution. Nonetheless, the findings are notable because, in spite of adding the College Success class to their regular course load, students in the program kept pace with the control group (most of whom did not take the course) on academic outcomes. This finding suggested that when the program ended, the skills and study habits gained from the course might transfer to other classes. However, despite its early promise, the program’s effects were not sustained and did not translate into meaningful impacts on students’ academic success over the long term.

These sobering findings are a reminder of the challenges faced by community colleges in general and students on probation in particular. While the Enhanced Opening Doors program may be a good start, a more intensive or longer-lasting initiative may be necessary to help probationary students beyond the short term. With the long-term results of the Opening Doors study at Chaffey now known, administrators, counselors, faculty, and researchers should begin to consider what can be done for probationary students in the future.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

The long-term follow-up at Chaffey College, presented in this report, was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant #R305A100066-11 to MDRC. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. We are very appreciative of the Institute's generous support.

The original work on the Opening Doors demonstration received support from several foundations and government agencies, which are listed at the front of this report. We are grateful for their generous backing and ongoing commitment to the project. We particularly thank The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation, which provided special funding to support the Opening Doors programs at Chaffey College.

We are grateful to the many administrators, faculty, and staff at Chaffey who made Opening Doors possible. There is not enough space to mention everyone who has played a role in the programs and the study, but we particularly want to acknowledge Ricardo Diaz, the Opening Doors Coordinator at Chaffey, who has been a terrific partner since the inception of the project. He collaborated with several others at the college to design the program and study, and he provided us with updates on the program's operations after the cohort described in this report had completed Opening Doors.

Several people have been instrumental in providing student transcript and probation data to MDRC over the course of the study. From Chaffey, special thanks are due to Inge Pelzer, currently the Executive Assistant to the President, and Jim Fillpot, the Director of Institutional Research. In addition, from the California Community College Chancellor's Office, we would like to thank Patrick Perry, Vice Chancellor, and Myrna Huffman, Director of Information Systems, for providing transcript data from their database, which helped us tell a richer story.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to the Opening Doors project and to this report. Katherine Morriss coordinated the report production process, created exhibits, and conducted fact-checking. Caitlin Platania also contributed to the fact-checking of the report. Michael Pih assisted with the programming of the data. The current MDRC staff mentioned, along with Gordon Berlin, Rob Ivry, Sue Scrivener, Herbert Collado, Pei Zhu, and John Hutchins, reviewed earlier drafts of this report and provided helpful comments. Alice Tufel edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the students who participated in the study at Chaffey. We hope that the findings from Chaffey will be used to improve college programs and services for these students and others like them in the future.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Community colleges across the United States face a difficult challenge. On the one hand, they are “open access” institutions, with a clear mission to serve students from all backgrounds and at varying levels of college readiness. On the other hand, they must uphold high academic standards in order to maintain accreditation and adequately prepare students for employment or transfer to four-year colleges and universities. How, then, can community colleges best serve students who want to learn but do not meet minimum academic standards?

Chaffey College, a large community college located about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, began to wrestle with this question early in the twenty-first century. At the time, roughly one out of every five students enrolled at Chaffey was on probation for poor academic performance (meaning they had a cumulative grade point average, or GPA, below 2.0) or were making insufficient progress toward a degree (meaning that they failed to complete half or more of the credits they attempted). Under the auspices of a national demonstration project called Opening Doors, Chaffey developed a program that was designed to increase probationary students’ chances of succeeding in college. The program went through two iterations: Opening Doors, which began in fall 2005, and Enhanced Opening Doors,¹ which began the following year. The Enhanced Opening Doors program, which is the subject of this report, comprised three core components:

- **College Success course.** Taught by a college counselor, this “guidance” course, which students in the program were told they had to take, was designed to help probationary students clarify their personal goals, understand college rules and regulations, and develop better study skills. A two-credit lecture course was linked to a one-credit workshop in which students would apply the principles covered in the lecture. The course’s credits counted toward full-time enrollment in the college and were included in students’ GPA, but did not count toward a degree or transfer to a four-year college or university. In addition, a voucher was provided to students in the program to cover the cost of College Success course books. A second-semester College Success course, which was not mandatory, was also offered to students in the program; however, only a minority of students enrolled in the second-semester College Success course.

¹At Chaffey, the second iteration of the program, called “Enhanced Opening Doors” in this report, was called “Opening Doors to Excellence.”

- **Visits to the Success Centers.** As part of the College Success course, students were expected to complete five visits to the college’s “Success Centers,” where all Chaffey students could get extra help in reading, writing, and math. These visits also included assignments for students in the Enhanced Opening Doors program, linked to the College Success course, that covered the following topics: skills assessment, learning styles, time management, use of resources, and test preparation.
- **Improved counseling.** The instructors of the College Success courses were expected to work with students during class time and to meet with them outside of class to provide extra advising and counseling as needed.

In order to determine the effectiveness of Chaffey’s Enhanced Opening Doors program, MDRC — the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization responsible for launching and managing the Opening Doors demonstration — conducted a random assignment evaluation. MDRC randomly assigned 444 students either to a program group that was eligible to participate in the Enhanced Opening Doors program as described above or to a control group whose members could take a College Success course (though very few did), could visit the Success Centers on their own, and could access the college’s standard counseling services. Random assignment ensures that both observed characteristics (for example, race and gender) and unobserved characteristics (for example, tenacity and motivation) are distributed similarly between the two research groups. Consequently, subsequent differences in academic outcomes — known as *impacts* — can be confidently attributed to the program, rather than to preexisting differences between the two research groups.

Early results from the evaluation found that the program led to positive results during the two semesters that students were enrolled in the program (the “program semesters”).² This report extends follow-up on the Chaffey sample to four years after students entered the study to determine whether the Enhanced Opening Doors program continued to help students perform academically, persist in college, and earn college degrees at Chaffey or at other institutions to which they transferred during the study period.

The key findings from this report are:

- **The message matters — optional program activities had lower participation rates compared with required program activities.**

²Susan Scrivener, Colleen Sommo, and Herbert Collado, *Getting Back on Track: Effects of a Community College Program for Probationary Students* (New York: MDRC, 2009).

The original program, which is not the main focus of this report, offered students the chance to participate in the program's College Success course, but did not require that they participate. In this first iteration of the program, only about half the students who were assigned to the program group enrolled in the class, believing that it was optional.

In the Enhanced Opening Doors program, which began in the 2006-2007 academic year, students who were randomly assigned to the program group were informed that participation in the first semester of Enhanced Opening Doors was required, and that they would not be able to register for other classes unless they signed up for the College Success course. Participation in the first-semester College Success course jumped to 72 percent (from 52 percent in the original Opening Doors program). Although college administrators ultimately decided not to enforce the "requirement" for students who did not comply, evidence suggests that the change in message led to a higher rate of compliance, an important lesson from this project that may be applicable more broadly.

- **The short-term effects of Chaffey's Enhanced Opening Doors program were encouraging.**

The Enhanced Opening Doors program was a two-semester intervention, as noted earlier. Students in the program group and control group had significantly different experiences during the first semester of the program. Most program group students took the College Success course, whereas control group students did not, and program group students visited the Success Centers more often than did their control group counterparts. In theory, completing the College Success course and visiting the Success Centers will enable students to perform better academically during the program period and to achieve longer-term success as a result of the skills and study habits they gain through these experiences. During the second semester of the program, in spring 2007, the experiences of program and control group students once again differed, although not nearly as dramatically as they had during the first program semester.

When the two program semesters were complete, students in the program group had earned more credits than students in the control group and were more likely to have had a cumulative GPA of over 2.0. (See Table ES.1.) These positive program effects were partly driven by the College Success course, whose associated credits cannot be applied toward a degree and cannot be transferred to a four-year college or university. When credit accumulation is examined including only degree-applicable credits and credits earned through developmental education classes (which are not applicable toward a degree but count toward enrollment), and the College Success course is excluded, program and control group members were observed to have earned similar numbers of credits during the first two semesters of the study. However, most program group students took at least one semester of the College Success course during the first two program semesters in addition to their regular course load — so the fact that

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Table ES.1

Academic Outcomes at Chaffey College After Two Enhanced Opening Doors Program Semesters

Chaffey College Four-Year Follow-Up Report

Outcome	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	Standard Error
Cumulative credits earned	8.4	5.7	2.7 ***	0.7
Cumulative GPA higher than 2.0 ^a (%)	35.7	23.6	12.1 ***	4.3
Cumulative degree-applicable GPA higher than 2.0 ^b (%)	30.3	23.2	7.2 *	4.2
Ever in good academic standing ^c (%)	30.4	15.9	14.5 ***	4.0
Sample size (n = 444)	224	220		

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from Chaffey College transcript and probation data.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

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

Estimates are adjusted by round of random assignment.

Cumulative measures are based on the two program semesters only.

^aGrades earned in all courses except for developmental courses are used in the calculation of grade point average (GPA). Students who do not have a GPA for this time period are included as zeros.

^bGrades earned only in degree-applicable courses, which exclude the College Success course, are used in the calculations of GPA. Students who do not have a GPA for this time period are included as zeros.

^cSample members who were not enrolled were not considered to be in good academic standing.

program group students did not fall behind control group members on degree-applicable and developmental credits may be viewed as a positive finding. In other words, despite having an additional three-credit class as part of their course load, program group students managed to keep pace with their control group counterparts on their other credits.

In addition, the program had a positive impact on GPA for degree-applicable courses (that is, excluding the College Success course) during the two program semesters, suggesting that the positive program effects were not solely a result of the credits and grades in the College Success course. Finally, compared with their control group counterparts, students in the program group were nearly twice as likely to be in good academic standing at the end of the two-semester follow-up period. In sum, just after the program services were complete, program group students' academic outcomes looked promising.

- **Despite the program’s encouraging short-term effects, it did not meaningfully improve students’ long-term academic outcomes.**

This report presents results up to and including four years after students entered the study — an additional three years beyond the earlier short-term follow-up. At that point, it is expected that any positive short-term effect of the program would have translated into students making more progress toward a degree with respect to degree-applicable credits, which a student must earn in order to graduate, as well as developmental credits, which students are encouraged to complete prior to enrolling in certain degree-applicable courses. As shown in Table ES.2, the evidence from this study does not indicate that the program had significant, positive, long-term effects (compared with Chaffey College’s regular services) with respect to degree-applicable plus developmental credit accumulation, continued enrollment, or attainment of a degree or certificate. In general, students who were offered the opportunity to participate in the Enhanced Opening Doors program had academic outcomes that were similar to those of the students in the control group during the four-year follow-up period. After four years, program group members maintained their edge on total credits earned, but this impact mostly reflects the three-credit College Success course that students took during the first semester of the study, which does not help them move closer to earning a degree or certificate. Strikingly, four years after the study began, only 7 percent of all students in the study had earned a degree or certificate, and 44 percent were still enrolled in school (with 21-22 percent still at Chaffey College).

- **The Chaffey College Enhanced Opening Doors program had a net cost of around \$1,300 per program group member over the course of the two program semesters.**

The net cost of \$1,300 per program group member represents the difference between the gross cost per program group member (\$4,300) and the gross cost per control group member (\$3,000). One way to lower the cost of the program and potentially improve its overall cost-effectiveness would be to make the Enhanced Opening Doors program a one-semester, mandated intervention.

- **When all credits are considered, including the College Success course, the cost per credit earned for the program group was slightly lower than for the control group. However, the cost-effectiveness of earning credits fades away when only degree-applicable and developmental credits are considered.**

Specifically, the cost per credit earned for program group members (\$516 per credit) was 3 percent less expensive than the cost per credit earned for control group members (\$530 per credit). This finding is the result of program group members passing a higher percentage of their attempted credits compared with control members. However, when credits associated with

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Table ES.2

**Primary Academic Outcomes, Enhanced Opening Doors,
Four Years After Random Assignment**

Chaffey College Four-Year Follow-Up Report

Outcome	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	Standard Error
Number of semesters enrolled at any college	4.18	4.06	0.12	0.24
Cumulative degree-applicable and developmental credits earned ^{a,b}	18.4	17.1	1.4	1.9
Enrolled at any college in year 4 or earned a degree or certificate (%)	45.5	45.5	0.1	4.7
Enrolled at any college in year 4	44.2	44.1	0.1	4.7
Earned a degree or certificate	7.6	6.4	1.2	2.4
Sample size (n = 444)	224	220		

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from Chaffey College transcript, California Community College Chancellor's Office, and National Student Clearinghouse data.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

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

Estimates are adjusted by round of random assignment.

Enrollment and credits earned are based on data from fall 2006 through summer 2010. Degree and certificate data are from fall 2006 through spring 2010.

^aIncludes credits earned in courses taken during the first four years of the study and excludes credits from the College Success course. If a student receives a letter grade in a course, this measure only includes credits in which the student earned a "C" or higher. If a student takes a class "pass/fail" or if the class is only offered "pass/fail," then this measure only includes a grade of "pass."

^bAt any public, two-year California college.

the College Success course are excluded and only degree-applicable and developmental credits are considered, the relative cost-effectiveness of the program fades away. Specifically, the cost per degree-applicable and developmental credit earned for the program group (\$797 per credit) was 26 percent more expensive than the cost per degree-applicable and developmental credit earned for the control group (\$635 per credit).

Conclusion

Chaffey College is one of only a small percentage of community colleges in the United States that has been willing to subject one of its programs to a rigorous, random assignment evalua-

tion. Because of the college's commitment to serving its students as well as possible, the staff members at Chaffey were eager to know how effective the Enhanced Opening Doors program was compared with the college's regular services for probationary students. Their willingness to participate in this study should be applauded, as it enables them to better serve their students and provides other college administrators, policymakers, and researchers with trustworthy information and evidence on which to base their decisions. Although there is not strong evidence that the Enhanced Opening Doors program has long-term outcomes that are significantly different from those produced by Chaffey's usual services, there are lessons that the college and policymakers can take away from this study.

For example, the Opening Doors study at Chaffey College began as a study of one program (the Opening Doors program), and that program evolved into a stronger second program (the Enhanced Opening Doors program). A prior MDRC report describes the differences between the two programs and their evolution in detail, but one of the main observations in the programs' development was a change from optional participation in certain program services to telling students that they were required to participate, which seemed to have effects on program participation and short-term program impacts.³ Rates of participation in the College Success course were low in the original program, which led Chaffey administrators to require participation in the College Success course in the Enhanced Opening Doors program, and they told students that their registration would be blocked if they did not comply. This change in policy and messaging was associated with a large increase in program participation. It is sometimes the case that those individuals who are at the greatest risk of failure are also those who are the least likely to participate in programs that are designed to help them succeed. College administrators must weigh their desire to allow their students autonomy and decision-making power against the fact that doing so may reduce participation in the very programs that have been created for their benefit. Clearly, this is a difficult balance to achieve — requiring individuals to participate in a program without their buy-in can backfire, yet allowing complete flexibility, especially when dealing with students who have a low likelihood of success, may not be in the students' best interest.

A final lesson that has been emerging from a number of community college studies is that one- and two-semester interventions may not be sufficient to make a lasting difference.⁴ Students often do better while they receive interventions, but the impacts fade once the interven-

³Susan Scrivener, Colleen Sommo, and Herbert Collado, *Getting Back on Track: Effects of a Community College Program for Probationary Students* (New York: MDRC, 2009).

⁴See, for example, Susan Scrivener and Michael Weiss, *More Guidance, Better Results? Three-Year Effects of an Enhanced Student Services Program at Two Community Colleges* (New York: MDRC, 2009); Evan Weissman, Kristin F. Butcher, Emily Schneider, Jedediah Teres, Herbert Collado, and David Greenberg, *Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Math: Impact Studies at Queensborough and Houston Community Colleges* (New York: MDRC, 2011).

tions end. While it is not realistic — and probably not advisable — for interventions to last indefinitely, program operators might consider whether they can do more to help students make a smooth transition to regular college services once an intervention like Enhanced Opening Doors ends. For example, program operators might place greater emphasis on mapping out what courses students should take once the intervention ends and conducting periodic follow-up to make sure that students remain on track and have not encountered new barriers to success. Some experts have suggested that community colleges need to institute better policies and create clearer pathways that will help *all* students complete the requirements for earning a certificate or degree as quickly as possible.⁵ Some promising new initiatives, such as the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)⁶ and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Completion by Design Initiative,⁷ are aspiring to do just that, and may soon offer lessons on how it might be achieved.

⁵See, for example, Davis Jenkins, “Get with the Program: Accelerating Community College Students’ Entry into and Completion of Programs of Study,” CCRC Working Work Paper No. 32 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teacher’s College, Columbia University, 2011); Postsecondary Success Team, *Completion by Design Concept Paper* (Seattle: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010).

⁶See www.cuny.edu/academics/programs/notable/asap/about.html.

⁷See www.completionbydesign.org.

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About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.