

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal
Learning Communities Project for Fall, 2014
Submitted by Robert Porter
Political Science Department
November 2013

Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status
Full-time hire date: August, 1997
Previous Sabbaticals: 1 (Spring 2007)

Background of Sabbatical Project

Like many other colleges, Ventura College is having issues with students lacking basic skills, many of whom are Hispanic and/or low-income. These types of at-risk students may be better served by non-traditional types of teaching and learning, such as learning communities. I want to make a case that there is a need for this type of approach here at Ventura College. Two pieces of data especially point in this direction.

First, Ventura College has comparatively low scores on each of the five Community College Student Success Evaluation (CCSSE) indicators: (1) active and collaborative learning, (2) student effort, (3) academic challenge, (4) student-faculty interaction, and (5) support for learners. In their findings, CCSSE specifically mentions the value of learning communities, noting that "participation in a learning community has a notably positive relationship with three CCSSE benchmarks: active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners." (CCSSE: 2010)

Second, Ventura College still has a large gap in success rates between white students (74.1%) and Hispanic students (66.3%). Research assessing the impact of learning communities on first-year Hispanic students shows that learning community practices—especially collaborative learning—help first year Hispanic students succeed (Huerta and Bray: 2013). Engstrom and Tinto also compared the effects of learning communities on the persistence of low-income students and found a similar pattern. Notably, their research suggests that learning communities that combine basic skills courses, such as English, ESL, or math, with general education content courses are especially valuable for low-income students. (Engstrom and Tinto: 2007)

Learning communities, and the active/collaborative practices associated with them, may fill a need here at Ventura College. By linking classes around interdisciplinary themes and enrolling common cohorts of students, they create a kind of embedded environment for students to collaborate in. They're a proven high-impact strategy in colleges across the country. (Kuh: 2008, Tinto: 1997, 2003; Brownell and Swaner: 2009) The 2013 California Community College Student Success Task Force report specifically mentions learning communities as a promising model for under-prepared students. Regarding learning communities and basic skills, they write: "The Task Force believes that the community college system must foster more effective basic skills instruction on a large scale. We cannot simply place students into classes that use the same mode of instructional delivery that failed to work for them in high school. Within the system, colleges have developed or adopted alternatives to the traditional curriculum that show great promise in revolutionizing the delivery of basic skills instruction to adults. For example: (1) the use of learning communities..." (CCCSSTF: 2013)

Ventura College has a pilot program in learning communities that began in June, 2011, when a group of faculty and administrators went to the Washington Center for Improving the Quality

of Undergraduate Learning. I was the lead faculty member and our team included Gwendolyn Huddleston, Kathryn Schoenrock, Lauri Moore, Kevin Bortolin, Scott Corbett, Dan Walsh, and Tacey Hosley. During this one-week training on learning communities, we came up with a two-year (2011-2013) Learning Community "Action Plan" for Ventura College (see attached). We also formed an Academic Senate "Committee on Learning Communities" of which I am the chair. We joined the California Consortium on Learning Communities and regularly attend their spring conference.

Purpose of Sabbatical Proposal

The purpose of this sabbatical is to deepen the institutionalization of learning communities at Ventura College. Of special concern is to use learning communities as a way to address the issue of lower retention and success rates of at-risk students—those needing basic skills, many of whom are Hispanic.

Components of Sabbatical Proposal

- Create a Year-Long Learning Community Cohort with Political Science and Developmental English

The first phase of my sabbatical leave project will be to create a new sequential learning community combining developmental English and Political Science. The idea will be to combine an English 3 class with American government in one semester, followed by English 2 and an Introduction to Politics Class the next semester. This will involve re-doing the syllabi for both of these political science classes and providing course content that is more specifically designed for developmental English students. Moreover, the learning community cohort will be purposefully introduced to student services on campus such as the Reading and Writing Center. Counselors will be invited to work with this cohort more closely and offer class presentations. This type of learning community is very common in colleges promoting reading and writing across the curriculum, a current project at Ventura College.

- Create Integrative Learning Materials for Faculty

Many faculty feel overwhelmed with the idea of starting a learning community with another instructor. In fact, there are many easier ways for faculty to begin collaborating, such as creating integrative assignments. I'd like to create some resources that faculty could use to help them with this process. First off would be a continuum of practices, ranging from things like using a common book, film, reader, guest speaker, or integrated assignment all the way to a learning community where two classes are made co-requisites and faculty co-teach the entire course. I believe that if faculty had a menu of integrated learning options they would be more likely to start doing this kind of teaching. As part of this project, I'll be examining best practices at other colleges regarding learning communities and integrative learning assignments. Within this search, I'll be focusing on what works for at-risk students in community colleges. The materials I develop for faculty can be distributed through professional development activities as well as made available on the Learning Communities Committee website.

Value of Sabbatical Project to VCCCD and Ventura College

Our small learning communities program at Ventura College could become a model for our district, especially with a focus on increasing retention and success rates for students needing basic skills work. For Ventura College specifically, the value of not losing so many at-risk students, many of whom are Hispanic, cannot be overemphasized. Learning communities can be a powerful intervention strategy to assist this population. It has been shown to be a high-impact strategy in many other settings. I am also interested in deepening the collaboration between Ventura College and Moorpark College so that we can share best practices regarding learning communities. These outcomes could be measured by keeping track of the number of learning communities offered across the district as well at Ventura College. Another measurable outcome can be the number of faculty using integrative learning assignments.

Value of Sabbatical Project to Ventura College Students

The goal of learning communities and other high-impact strategies is to improve teaching and learning. Targeting learning communities towards certain populations, such as at-risk students, should increase the retention and success rates of these students. This outcome could be measured by comparing courses using learning communities or integrated learning assignments with courses not using these approaches. The more confident we are that this strategy is working, the more we may want to increase the number of learning communities on campus. To measure the impact on Hispanic students, in particular, this data will need to be disaggregated to track their progress. Finally, if this initiative grows, we should begin to see some improvement in the three CCSSE indicators mentioned earlier as well as a decrease in the success rate gap between Hispanic and white students.

Value of Sabbatical Proposal to the Instructor

I'm convinced that students learn better with the kinds of collaborative and active approaches used in learning communities. The more I learn about integrative assignments that promote active and collaborative learning, the more I can use these in my classes and teach other faculty about them. The value to me can be measured by the number of new integrative learning assignments I'm using in my courses, the number of professional development presentations I give, and the number of learning communities I teach. I'm very passionate about this approach and am hoping that other faculty will see its value as well.

I thank the committee for your time and consideration

Respectfully yours,

Robert Porter, PhD
Professor of Political Science

Sources:

Brownell, Jayne and Lynn Swaner. "High-Impact Practices: Applying the Learning Outcomes Literature to the Development of Successful Campus Programs," *Peer Review*, Association of American Colleges and Universities. Washington DC: Spring 2009

Engstrom, Catherine and Vincent Tinto. "Pathways to Student Success: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Success of Academically Under-Prepared College Students," School of Education, Syracuse University: 2007

Huerta, Juan Carlos and Jennifer Bray. "How Do Learning Communities Affect First-Year Latino Students," *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, Article 5: 1-28-2013

Kuh, George D. "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access To Them, and Why They Matter," American Association of Colleges and Universities. Washington DC: 2008

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623.

Tinto, V. (2003). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success. Higher Education Monograph Series, 2003(1), 1-8. Higher Education Program, School of Education, Syracuse University.

"Advancing Student Success in California's Community Colleges," The Final Recommendations of the California Community College Student Success Task Force. 2013

Community College Survey of Student Engagement. Ventura College, Key Findings: 2010 and 2013



[VENTURA COLLEGE]
LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAM ACTION PLAN
JUNE 2011- JUNE 2013

This plan focuses on three essential goals for learning community programs: increasing cross-campus collaboration to improve student persistence and achievement; promoting integrative learning; and enhancing students' experiences of learning in the classroom.

PART ONE: INCREASING STUDENT PERSISTENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

A. CLARIFY GOALS/PROGRAM FOCUS

Mission: Build a community of learners.

Goals:

1. Promote student engagement (motivate student effort, engagement in class discussions, student to student interaction, student to faculty interaction, student to student services/resources interaction, and student to community interaction).
 2. Create a holistic approach to engage students to actively participate in their own learning to achieve success, retention, and persistence.
 3. Provide learning opportunities for applying and integrating curriculum across the disciplines.
 4. Utilize professional development to provide spaces/opportunities for faculty to share ideas, coordination, successes, failures, integrative learning, service learning, and other events.
1. What steps can be taken to strengthen your program's focus on particular educational goals?
 - Institutionalize (recruit, publicize, promote) our learning communities committee
 - Send interested faculty to learning community conferences
 - Join the California Consortium of Learning Community Colleges
 - Identify and create learning community cohort(s)
 - Needs assessment with students
 - Flex day workshops
 - Formal and informal faculty interactions
 2. What quantitative and qualitative indicators can you use to determine whether your learning community program is doing what you intend it to do, i.e. having a positive effect on student persistence and achievement—and how often will you look at this data?
 - Develop assessment tools for evaluating learning communities (Washington Center survey, VC retention data, CCSES, pre and post-test surveys, needs assessment)
 3. To what extent is (or could) this data about the effectiveness of the program be shared with everyone participating in the learning community program? In which venues? How could the practice of discussing information about students' achievements or stumbling blocks be strengthened?

Disseminate all data to the campus community through professional development opportunities, web site, and committee minutes.
 4. Who on your team needs to do what, and by when, to move ahead in this area?
- The learning community committee, beginning fall 2011 semester. Support from professional development, and Title V Grant support team. Learning community team will meet prior to Flex day professional development session for development of training.

B. Collaborate to accomplish student persistence and achievement goals

Campus network/collaboration with administrators:

1. What steps can be taken to situate the learning community program more centrally within institutional priorities and students' educational aspirations?
 - a. Collaborate with basic skills grant, and Title V Cooperative Grant.
 - b. Align the learning community goals with the institution mission and core institutional goals.
2. What steps can be taken to engage administrators more effectively with the success of the learning community program?
 - a. Report on action plan goals at Administrative Council,
 - b. Report all data findings to administrators.
3. Who on your team needs to do what, and by when, to move ahead in this area?
 - a. Learning community coordinator and team will present at Flex day activities.
 - b. Academic Senate President and Dean will present to Administrative Council.
 - c. Quarterly reports will be presented to President and Executive Vice President.
 - d. Inclusion of Learning Community activities in President's campus wide updates.

Campus network/collaboration with student support staff:

1. What steps can be taken to strengthen collaboration between academics and student support services in relation to increasing student success in targeted areas?
 - a. Integrate student service professionals in learning community committee and training.
 - b. Learning community committee representatives present and participate in student service meetings.
 - c. Collaborate with the Registrar's office to streamline cross listed (co-requisite) learning community courses.
2. What are some concrete ways to involve counselors and advisors more directly in the learning community program?
 - a. Partner student services counselors, and Library/Learning Resource services, with academics to promote student success in the classroom. (Create learning communities and/or integrations techniques to provide student success information in the academic classroom.)
3. What are some concrete ways to strengthen relationships between students in learning community courses and on-campus resources that support their success?
 - a. In addition to #2, we will inform learning community students about all campus venues to connect students to on campus resources. Such as, student clubs, tutoring, library resources, counseling, etc.
4. Who on your team needs to do what, and by when, to move ahead in this area?
 - a. Learning Community teaching faculty will coordinate with student service counselors, and library personnel to schedule visits in their classrooms.
 - b. Learning Community committee will invite Registrar, and Dean of Student Services to learning community committee meeting.

C. Integrate infrastructure—the work of the learning community coordinator/coordinating committee

1. Which aspects of the infrastructure for learning communities can be strengthened?
 - a. Secure funding to support learning community coordinator(s) release time.
 - b. Provide work study student to support learning community coordinator(s).
 - c. Resolve registration software issues to support learning community cross listed classes.
 - d. Develop and launch a learning community web site.
 - e. Create a learning community group on the student portal.
 - f. Secure funding to support learning community professional development.
2. Who on your team needs to do what, and by when, to move ahead in this area?
 - a. Learning community coordinators, dean of learning communities, student services dean, and registrar will take action to achieve all goals listed in #1. Goal is fall 2012.

PART TWO: PROMOTING INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

A. Strengthen orientation towards integrative learning

1. What steps need to be taken to foster and promote an understanding of integrative learning within your learning community program?
 - o Coordinate with professional development committee to present and promote learning community initiatives.
 - o Regular meetings to collaborate between student services and academics to educate and explore the depth and breadth of possibilities of integration opportunities.
 - o Recruit a variety of faculty from a broad range of academic offerings into the learning community integration possibilities.
2. What steps can be taken to more strongly align the learning community focus on integrative learning with campus-wide undergraduate learning outcomes?
 - o Refer to Part two A1.
 - o As per our goal, align learning community goals with core institutional competencies.
3. Who needs to do what, and by when, to move this work along?
 - o Learning community will implement these goals by Fall 2012.

B. Design for integrative learning

1. How can you track both the number and the quality of integrative assignments given to students in your learning community program?
 - a. The learning community committee and all participating faculty will work with the institutional researcher and dean to collect, analyze, and disseminate data.
2. What can you do to support faculty in designing more and better integrative assignments?
 - a. Learning community committee will collaborate with professional development activities to utilize a teacher exchange group to support and further develop learning community and integrative assignments.
3. Who needs to do what, and by when, to move ahead in this area?
 - a. Learning community committee, professional development committee, dean of learning community, and teacher exchange group will implement this by fall 2012.

C. Assess integrative learning

1. What steps can be taken to create more opportunities for assessing evidence of students' integrative thinking?

- The Learning Community committee will explore the link between individual course Student Learning Outcomes and Integrative Learning Student Learning Outcomes.
 - The Learning Community committee will facilitate faculty to develop measuring tools regarding their integrative assignments.
 - All participants will assess students learning through our Student Learning Outcomes process. This will include the Learning Community committee reviewing the reported Student Learning Outcomes against the Integrative Learning Value Rubric and compare to core institutional level Student Learning Outcomes.
2. Who needs to do what, and by when, to move this work along?
- The Learning Community committee will facilitate workshops in conjunction with the Professional Development Committee to train faculty in developing assignments and assessment tools to measure integrative learning during the 2011 and 2012 academic year.

PART THREE: ENHANCING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

A. Examine/strengthen existing classroom practices in learning communities

1. What steps need to be taken so faculty can build their repertoire of effective curriculum design and pedagogical approaches?
 - The Learning Community committee will develop the training materials and workshops for training faculty in integrative learning. This includes promoting and encouraging faculty involvement and participation. The goals are to develop collaborative learning in an effort to encourage student engagement, student effort, and integrative thinking.
 - The Learning Community committee will create and adopt a proposal process for choosing learning community course offerings. This is done in conjunction with departments, division deans, Executive Vice President of Student Learning, and the college scheduling process.
 - The Learning Community committee will work with the departments, division deans and the Executive Vice President of Student Learning in developing a short and long range plan for the implementation of learning communities and integrative learning.
 - The Learning Community committee will continuously assess the effectiveness of integrative learning and revise training workshops and support systems as needed. Assessment includes reviewing the results of the CCSSE regarding student engagement. Pre-tests and post-tests processes will also be developed and implemented using the CCSSE model. Additionally refer to our response to Part Two, C 1.
2. Who needs to do what, and by when, to investigate what professional development opportunities already exist on your campus to strengthen classroom practices?
 - The Learning Community committee will work with the Professional Development committee, and Dean of Professional Development, to participate in the ongoing faculty development training plans. Current professional development plans will be utilized.

B. Plan professional development using faculty inquiry to enhance student learning

1. How can you integrate the professional development for learning communities into the broader professional development plan for your campus?
 - The campus currently has a grant and plans to increase professional development trainings for faculty beginning the 2011-2012 Academic year and ongoing. Learning communities training of faculty and the integration of student services and academics is a goal of the Title V grant. As such, there is funding to support this training and development opportunities.
2. How can you ensure that faculty development opportunities are accessible for part-time faculty?

- The Title V grant which will assist in funding the Professional Development expansion has a goal of including part-time faculty in training opportunities. This may include evening and weekend workshops, paying for substitutes to encourage part time faculty to attend trainings, and online course trainings as well as web site development and links to support information for all faculty which includes part-time faculty. There is a goal to enhance and encourage part-time and full-time alliance. The teaching technique exchange group will participate in achieving this goal.
3. How are you going to evaluate the effectiveness of your professional development offerings?
 - All professional development offerings are evaluated by participants. Data collection on student engagement and success is measured as part of our assessment plans mentioned in earlier comments.
 4. Who needs to do what, and by when, to move this work along?

Professional development expansion is planned for the 2011-2012 academic year. This will be designed and conducted by the Learning Community committee in conjunction with the Professional Development Committee and the Title V Instructional Design Specialist.

C. Assess students' experiences of learning in learning community classes and programs

1. How are you going to decide what instruments to use to assess students' experiences of learning in learning communities?
 - The Washington Center survey and results from the CCSSE will be utilized. Additionally pre and post-test surveys will be utilized as our initial instruments. This was decided by the Learning Community committee.
2. Regardless of the tools you choose, how might you organize conversations to discuss the results?
 - The Learning Community committee will hold regular meetings to have conversations to discuss assessment of learning community results. Additionally, all faculty will be invited to participate in the conversation of assessment of learning communities in professional development trainings and through their evaluations of the training opportunities. Faculty participating in learning community and integrative assignments will present the data of the results of the assessment of their student's experiences, and invited to join with and add to the conversation as well.
3. How will these discussions lead to changes or adjustments in classroom practice?
 - Results of discussions will generate changes to best practices and continuous quality improvement of integrative assignment and learning community offerings. This will be implemented by using the Student Learning Outcomes process. This will provide a foundation of support for further development of Learning Communities and integrative assignments. Keeping in mind, the continuous need to reassess our original goals of increasing student engagement, and retention, persistence, and student success. (Note: Student Learning Outcomes process includes the individual faculty member, individual course offerings, department level review, program level review, and institutional level review. This process includes a link to funding resources and institutional support services and planning. Such as ongoing faculty development training.)
4. Who needs to do what, and by when, to move this work along?
 - Assessment tools will be chosen and implemented in the 2011-2012 Academic year and will be further implemented after the initial pilot year. This will at first be implemented by the Learning Community committee in relation with the participating faculty and departments. As it continues it will be absorbed as part of our ongoing Student Learning Outcomes process supported by both the Learning Community committee and the Professional Development committee.

Learning Community

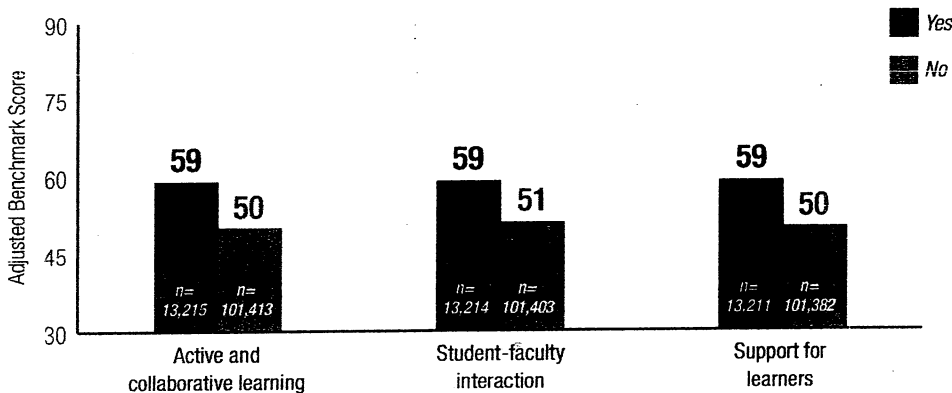
Participation in a learning community has a notably positive relationship with three *CCSSE* benchmarks: *active and collaborative learning*, *student-faculty interaction*, and *support for learners*. For these three benchmarks, *CCSSE* respondents who say they participated in a learning community have higher adjusted benchmark scores, on average, than those who say they did not participate in such programs.

Participation in a learning community has a notably positive relationship with the *SENSE engaged learning* benchmark.

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Notable differences in engagement on three *CCSSE* benchmarks

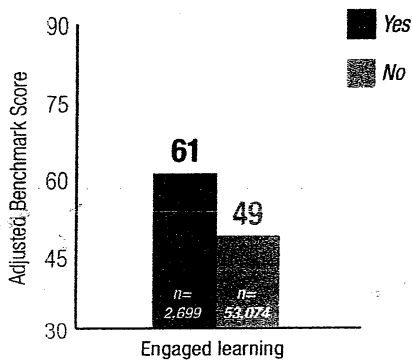
During my first term at this college, I enrolled in an organized “learning community” (two or more courses that a group of students take together).



Source: 2012 *CCSSE* data

Notable differences in engagement on the *SENSE engaged learning* benchmark

During my first semester/quarter at this college, I was enrolled in an organized “learning community” (two or more courses that a group of students take together).



Source: 2012 *SENSE* data (entering students)

“The first day, everyone hit it off. We were exchanging numbers, and then we started having study groups, and then we were hanging out outside of class ... I don’t even call them classmates. They’re more like family.”

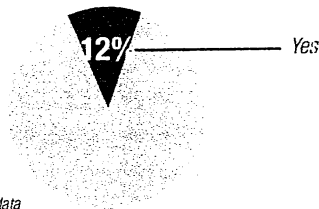
Student

What makes a difference notable? Levels of engagement are reported as adjusted marginal mean scores on benchmarks. See page 3 for an explanation of the approach to data analysis.

PARTICIPATION

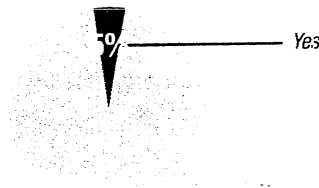
More than half of colleges (54%) offer learning communities, but only 12% of *CCSSE* respondents and 5% of *SENSE* respondents had this experience during their first term in college.

During my first term at this college, I enrolled in an organized "learning community" (two or more courses that a group of students take together). (N=149,292)



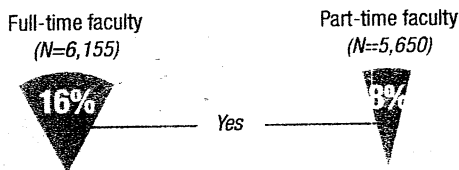
Source: 2012 CCSSE data

During my first semester/quarter at this college, I was enrolled in an organized "learning community" (two or more courses that a group of students take together). (N=52,695)



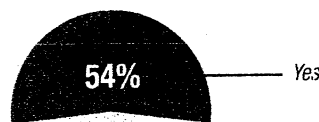
Source: 2012 SENSE data (entering students)

During the current academic year at this college, have you taught or facilitated an organized "learning community" (two or more courses that a group of students take together)?



Source: 2012 CCSSE data

Does your college implement any kind of a learning community? (N=365)



Source: 2012 CCIS data

KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Learning Communities Increase Credits and Degrees Earned

In the past 10 years, Kingsborough Community College (NY) has taken learning communities from a small pilot to a robust commitment that now serves 1,200 students each semester. The college is continuing to build its learning community programs for entering and continuing students.

In 2003, as part of the MDRC Opening Doors project*, Kingsborough launched multiple learning communities for first-time, full-time freshmen. Cohorts of 25 students coregistered into three classes during their first semester. These classes included English (college-level or developmental, based on proficiency); a standard transferable college general education course; and a student success seminar taught by an academic advisor. The learning communities had tutors in the classroom, supplemental instruction, and individualized case management (one case manager per 75–100 students). Students also received textbook vouchers to offset their costs.

From the beginning, college leaders committed to having rigorous courses in the learning communities, and they held faculty members accountable for supporting students' efforts to integrate their coursework. Faculty members teaching in each learning community were asked to work collaboratively on curricula, coordinate shared assignments, and work together in evaluating student progress.

The 1,534 students participating in the initial Opening Doors project were randomly assigned over four semesters (fall 2003, spring 2004, fall 2004, and spring 2005). These students reflected the general composition of the college's student body. Students who were not selected to participate in the learning communities served as a control group. (There were 769 program group students, and 765 control group students.)

RESULTS: MORE CREDITS AND DEGREES

MDRC's longitudinal analyses show that a comprehensive one-semester program can improve student outcomes. Findings at the two-year mark did not show significant gains in students' fall-to-spring persistence rates (77% for learning community students vs. 75% for control students in the first year; 61% vs. 59% in the second year). After six years, however, MDRC found that learning community students graduated at a rate of 36%, as compared to a 31% graduation rate among control group students. This 5 percentage point gain represents about a 15% increase in degrees earned.

COLLABORATION AND COMMITMENT

With outcomes that continue to be encouraging, Kingsborough is deeply committed to learning communities. Faculty and student services staff attend weekly meetings to collaborate and discuss student progress, curriculum, and pedagogy. This cooperative time drives the academic affairs/student affairs collaboration that is at the heart of the program. Everyone who works with students is represented at the table. Participants listen to and learn from one another, and they continually discuss and refine their understanding of *student-centered*. Learning communities have changed the institutional culture—collaboration is now the way they do business, and the group favors evidence-based practices.

*The MDRC Opening Doors project focused on interventions designed to address the persistence and completion rates of at-risk students. According to MDRC's six-year follow-up report, this project was the first large-scale study on learning communities using random assignments.