

Executive Summary

OPENING DOORS

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

Effects of a Community College Program
for Probationary Students

Susan Scrivener
Colleen Sommo
Herbert Collado

APRIL 2009

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY
■

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Overview

Community colleges are often hailed as open-access institutions, and, arguably, no state has done more to ensure access than California. Unfortunately, community college completion rates are dismally low, in part because many students are underprepared for college-level work. In fact, tens of thousands of students in California are on probation, owing to poor grades or inadequate academic progress, or both, and face a high risk of not graduating. To date, little research has been done on how to help such students get back into good standing.

As part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration, Chaffey College, a large community college in Southern California, ran two versions of a program that was designed to improve outcomes among students who are on probation. Both versions offered a "College Success" course, taught by a college counselor, which provided basic information on study skills and the requirements of college. As part of the course, students were expected to visit the college's "Success Centers" — which were established at Chaffey in response to the school's recognition that many of its entering students were not prepared for college-level work, and where students could receive supplementary individualized or group instruction in math, reading, and writing. The original program, called "Opening Doors," was a one-semester, voluntary program. The other version, called "Enhanced Opening Doors" in this report, was a two-semester program, in which students were told that they were required to take the College Success course.

MDRC collaborated with the college to evaluate Opening Doors and Enhanced Opening Doors. In 2005, students were randomly assigned either to a program group that was eligible for Opening Doors or to a control group that received standard college courses and services. Any subsequent substantial differences between the program and control groups' academic outcomes can be attributed to Opening Doors. In 2006, a second group of students was randomly assigned to estimate the impacts of Enhanced Opening Doors. This report describes the findings for both programs, which include the following:

- **Chaffey's original, voluntary Opening Doors program did not meaningfully affect students' academic outcomes.** Program group students were no more likely to get off probation than were control group students.
- **In contrast, the Enhanced Opening Doors program, with its message of required participation, improved students' academic outcomes.** It increased the average number of credits earned, the proportion of students who earned a grade point average of 2.0 or higher, and the proportion who moved off probation.
- **Analyses suggest that the greater success of Enhanced Opening Doors might have been driven by the higher rate of participation in the College Success course.** Only about half the original Opening Doors program group took the College Success course, compared with approximately three-fourths of the Enhanced Opening Doors program group.

Following the study, Chaffey committed to institutionalizing a revised version of Enhanced Opening Doors to more fully implement and enforce the college's probation and dismissal policies, and built upon its experiences in the Opening Doors demonstration to develop a voluntary program, called "Smart Start," for new students who are at risk of experiencing difficulties.

Preface

For many low-income individuals, four-year colleges are out of reach — not just financially, but, just as important, academically. While community colleges have stepped into the breach and are seeing rising registration and enrollment rates, many students arrive at these schools underprepared for college-level work. In California, where the 110 community colleges located throughout the state have minimal entry requirements and the lowest tuition in the nation — meaning that virtually any resident who wants to attend college can do so — tens of thousands of students are on probation, owing to poor grades or inadequate academic progress, or both, and may not graduate. It is not enough, therefore, to help these students get into college; they need help staying there.

Many higher education institutions around the country offer services to probationary students, such as targeted advising and counseling and study skills courses. But what kind of an impact do these services have? Do they help students get back into good academic standing so they can finish school and earn a degree or certificate?

This report describes findings from a random assignment study of two versions of a program for students on probation at Chaffey College, a community college in Rancho Cucamonga, approximately 40 miles east of Los Angeles. Both versions offered students a “College Success” course, taught by a college counselor, that helped probationary students understand college rules and regulations and develop better study skills. As part of the course, students were expected to visit the college’s “Success Centers,” where individualized or group instruction in math, reading, and writing was available.

The original version of the program, called “Opening Doors,” was voluntary and lasted one semester. The second version, called “Enhanced Opening Doors” in this report, sought to improve upon the first; it lasted two semesters, and the students were told they had to attend the course. While the original version of the program had no discernible impact on academic outcomes, Enhanced Opening Doors increased both the number of credits that students earned and their grade point averages, as well as the proportion of students moving off of probation.

Given the documented positive relationship between attaining a postsecondary degree and higher earnings in the future, programs that might boost students’ chances of succeeding in community college deserve a close look. The Enhanced Opening Doors model described in this report is a promising example of one of those programs.

Gordon Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

The Opening Doors demonstration has 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. 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 also grateful to the many administrators, faculty, and staff at Chaffey who made Opening Doors a success. 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 some individuals. Marie Kane, the president of Chaffey when the study was launched, provided crucial leadership and support. Craig Justice, former Dean of Instructional Programs and Services, served as MDRC's primary liaison at the administrative level, and provided valuable assistance. Robert Bell, former Vice President of Student Services, provided important leadership, as well.

Ricardo Diaz, the Opening Doors Coordinator at Chaffey, 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, including Karen Sanders, currently the Assistant Dean of Student Services; Tim Arner, Greg Creel, Rob Rundquist, and Cindy Walker, the directors of the college's Success Centers; Laura Hope, currently the Interim Dean of Instructional Support; and counselors Laura Alvarado, Karina Jabalera, Monica Molina-Padilla, and Susan Starr.

Along with Ricardo and the counselors named above, the other participating counselors, the counselor apprentices, and the Success Center staff brought the program model to life. We cannot mention all these individuals by name, but greatly appreciate their commitment to the students and to the research. The counselor apprentices also provided invaluable assistance in recruiting students for the study.

Several people have been instrumental in providing student transcript and probation data to MDRC over the course of the study. Special thanks are due to Inge Pelzer, currently the Executive Assistant to the President, and Jim Fillpot, the Director of Institutional Research.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to the Opening Doors project and to this report. Robert Ivry developed the demonstration, and Thomas Brock has led the evaluation of the Opening Doors programs. They, along with former MDRC employee Rogéair Purnell, helped Chaffey get its program up and running. Vanessa Martin was the day-to-day liaison with Chaffey throughout most of the study, led MDRC's operations and research efforts at the college, and wrote a draft of an unpublished paper that informed this report. Charles Michalopoulos advised us on the quantitative analyses presented in this report. Sarah Spell and Michael

Pih, a former MDRC employee, programmed the data. Jo Anna Hunter worked with Battelle Memorial Institute to conduct the 12-month survey at Chaffey. The current MDRC staff mentioned, along with Gordon Berlin, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, and Margaret Bald, reviewed earlier drafts of this report and provided helpful comments. Erin Coghlan coordinated the report preparation process and conducted fact-checking. Joel Gordon, Galina Farberova, and Shirley James and her staff developed and monitored the random assignment and baseline data collection process. Alice Tufel edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the hundreds of students who participated in the study at Chaffey, and, in particular, those who answered surveys or participated in interviews or panel discussions. We hope that the findings from Chaffey and the other sites in Opening Doors will be used to improve college programs and services for them and others in the future.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Community colleges are often hailed as open-access institutions. Arguably, no state has done more to ensure access to community colleges than California. The state's 110 community colleges have minimal entry requirements and the lowest tuition of any state in the nation.¹ Unfortunately, recent analyses suggest that only one-fourth of students seeking a degree or certificate in California either transfer to a university or earn an associate's degree within six years.² One reason for this low rate of college completion is that many students are underprepared for college-level work. In fact, tens of thousands of students in California are on probation, owing to poor grades or inadequate academic progress, and face a high risk of not finishing school. Many colleges provide services to help probationary students succeed, but few studies have provided rigorous evidence on the effects of such services.

As part of MDRC's multisite Opening Doors demonstration, six community colleges across the country operated innovative programs to increase students' academic achievement and persistence. Chaffey College, a large community college in Southern California, operated two versions of a program that was designed to improve outcomes among students on probation. Referred to in this report as "Opening Doors," which was the original version, and "Enhanced Opening Doors," the programs offered a "College Success" course, taught by a college counselor, that provided instruction on topics designed to help students do well in school and get off probation. Students in the original Opening Doors program were encouraged to take the course, but it was voluntary. Students in the Enhanced Opening Doors program were told that they were required to take the course. As part of the course, students were expected to visit the college's "Success Centers" — which were established at Chaffey in response to the college's recognition that many of its students were not prepared for college-level work — where students could receive supplementary individualized or group instruction in math, reading, and writing. The one-semester Opening Doors program operated during fall 2005, and the two-semester Enhanced Opening Doors program operated during fall 2006 and spring 2007.

This report discusses the programs' implementation and their effects on students. To estimate the effects of the original Opening Doors program, MDRC randomly assigned students either to a program group that was eligible for Opening Doors or to a control group that re-

¹California Postsecondary Education Commission, "Average Annual Undergraduate Tuition, Fees, Room, and Board Charged for Full-Time Students in Public, 2-Year, Degree-Granting Institutions, 2005-06," *50 State Comparison — Postsecondary Education Data Graph: Average Annual Undergraduate Costs* (State of California, 2009). Web site: www.cpec.ca.gov.

²Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore, *Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Degree Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges* (Sacramento: California State University, Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, 2007).

ceived Chaffey's standard college courses and services. Any subsequent substantial differences between the program and control groups' academic outcomes can be attributed to the Opening Doors program. Although it was not part of MDRC's original research plan, when Chaffey administrators decided to offer Enhanced Opening Doors — a revised version of the original program — MDRC and the college agreed that it warranted a separate evaluation, and they randomly assigned a second group of students to either a program or a control group.

In summary, the key findings from this report are:

- **Chaffey's original Opening Doors program did not meaningfully affect students' academic outcomes.** Program and control group members earned about the same number of credits and earned similar grades. Opening Doors did not help students get off probation.
- **In contrast, Chaffey's Enhanced Opening Doors program improved students' academic outcomes.** It increased the average number of credits earned, the proportion of students who earned a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher, and the proportion who moved off probation.
- **Analyses suggest that the greater success of Enhanced Opening Doors might have been driven by the higher rate of participation in the College Success course.** Approximately three-fourths of the Enhanced Opening Doors program group members took the course, compared with only about half of the Opening Doors program group members.

How Were Chaffey's Programs Developed?

The history of Chaffey's Opening Doors program begins with its Basic Skills Transformation Project. In 2000, concerned that more than 70 percent of its entering students were scoring at a pre-collegiate level on skills assessment tests, Chaffey used special funds from the State of California to establish math, reading, and writing Success Centers. Students in some developmental-level math and English classes were required to visit the centers; other students could visit on a voluntary basis. The centers, which provide one-on-one instruction, tutoring, workshops, and computer-based assistance, are led by a full-time faculty and are supported by other instructors and tutors. Students can make appointments or drop in, as the facilities are open early morning through evening on weekdays and some hours on weekends. The college's Institutional Research office found that students who visited the Success Centers often had better academic outcomes than students who visited rarely or not at all, and that students on probation were the students least likely to use the Success Centers.

College administrators, meanwhile, were concerned with the growing number of students on probation. In spring 2004, approximately 3,500 students were on probation, or about one of every five students enrolled. At the time, probationary students typically received a letter from the college notifying them about their status and recommending that they meet with a college counselor. Like other students, probationary students could use the college's supports, such as the Success Centers, but they were not required to do so.

Building upon its experiences and drawing lessons from its data, Chaffey developed an innovative one-semester Opening Doors program model with three main components: a College Success course, which provided basic information on study skills and the requirements of college; visits to the Success Centers; and extra counseling. The primary goals of the program were to help students succeed in their classes and move off probation. With funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation, MDRC provided a grant to Chaffey College to develop and operate its original Opening Doors program. After Opening Doors ended, the college assessed the program and decided that student outcomes might be improved with some changes. As noted above, the next school year, Chaffey offered a revised version of the program, Enhanced Opening Doors.

Whom Did the Programs Serve?

Chaffey targeted students who were on academic or progress probation, had earned fewer than 35 credits, did not have an associate's degree, had a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and were 18 to 34 years of age. Students at Chaffey who have attempted 12 or more credits (since starting at Chaffey) are placed on *academic probation* if they have a cumulative GPA below 2.0 ("C") and on *progress probation* if they have not successfully completed 50 percent or more of the credits they attempted.

In 2005, 898 students were randomly assigned for the study of the original Opening Doors program, and, in 2006, 444 students were assigned for the study of the Enhanced Opening Doors program. Sixty percent of the Opening Doors and Enhanced Opening Doors sample members are women. Fifty-three percent identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, 23 percent as white, and 14 percent as black (non-Hispanic). Most sample members were between 18 and 20 years of age when they were randomly assigned. Most were unmarried and did not have any children. Approximately half of the sample members said they were financially dependent on their parents when they entered the study.

How Were the Impacts of the Programs Evaluated?

As noted above, MDRC assigned students, at random, to either a program group or to a control group to estimate the effect, or "impact," of Chaffey's original Opening Doors program.

The study is tracking the Opening Doors program group and control group over time to estimate whether Chaffey’s original program resulted in better outcomes for students compared with standard classes and services. Random assignment ensures that the characteristics, including motivation levels and demographic characteristics, of students in the program group and control group are similar when a study begins; hence, any subsequent substantial differences in outcomes can be attributed to the program. Using the same rigorous research design, MDRC randomly assigned a second group of students to estimate the effects of Enhanced Opening Doors compared with standard classes and services, and is tracking their outcomes. The study, therefore, is estimating the *value added* of Opening Doors and Enhanced Opening Doors, above and beyond what probationary students normally would have received at Chaffey during the study period. The study also allows for a direct comparison of the effects of the two programs in which most circumstances were similar except for the variations in the two programs, and offers suggestive evidence about why those effects might differ.

It is important to note two limitations of the study. First, in terms of a program-to-program comparison, because Opening Doors and Enhanced Opening Doors were operated sequentially, not simultaneously, MDRC is not able to definitively attribute any differences in the programs’ impacts to the programs themselves. (To do so would have required that students be randomly assigned to one of the two programs or to the control group, which was not possible.) Second, the study cannot disentangle the effects of each program component (such as the effects of the College Success course separate from the effects of asking students to visit the Success Centers). Rather, the study examines whether the *package* of reforms in Opening Doors and Enhanced Opening Doors led to different outcomes compared with standard classes and services.

Opening Doors: How Was It Implemented and Did It Make a Difference for Students?

Table ES.1 describes the key components of the original Opening Doors program, the Enhanced Opening Doors program, and the standard college services and courses that were available to the study’s two control groups. Chaffey’s original program, Opening Doors, offered a College Success course. The course was the central component of the Opening Doors program; program group students who did not take the course did not receive any Opening Doors services. The college encouraged Opening Doors program group members to take the College Success course, but it did not require that they do so.

The College Success course provided instruction on how to set personal goals, manage time, study effectively, understand college rules and regulations, and other topics designed to help students do well in school. It used *On Course*, a curriculum developed to promote “innovative learner-centered strategies for empowering students to become active, responsible

**The Opening Doors Demonstration
Table ES.1
Opening Doors Program, Enhanced Opening Doors Program,
and Regular College Environment for Probationary Students: Comparison of Key Features
Chaffey College Report**

Feature	Opening Doors Program, Fall 2005	Enhanced Opening Doors Program, Fall 2006 - Spring 2007	Regular College Environment (Control Group)
Recruitment for services	Students met with Opening Doors counselor, who encouraged them to take College Success course.	Students met with Enhanced Opening Doors counselor, who told them College Success course required.	Students not recruited for special services.
First-semester College Success course	3-credit course designed to help probationary students develop skills needed for academic success; taught by some experienced, some new counselors; approximately half of program group took course.	3-credit course designed to help probationary students develop skills needed for academic success; taught by experienced staff; almost three-fourths of program group took course.	Students could take College Success course; very few control group members did so.
Second-semester College Success course	1-credit course designed to build upon first-semester course; few students were informed about it, and very few took the course.	2-credit course designed to build upon first-semester course; all students who took first semester course invited to participate; roughly one-third of program group took course.	Students could take College Success course; very few control group members did so.
Success Centers	First-semester College Success students expected to visit centers 9 times; instructor assigned students to a center; content of assignments based on assessment results; some instructors did not enforce Success Center expectation.	First-semester College Success students expected to visit centers 5 times; students chose which center(s) to visit; content of assignments integrated and timed with course material; all instructors enforced Success Center expectation.	Students could visit centers on their own; students in some developmental classes were required to do so; some control group members did so.
Counseling	Students in College Success courses received help from counselor in class, and some met with counselor outside of class; counselors sometimes worked proactively to identify, resolve issues; students not in course could access college's counseling on their own.	Students in College Success courses received help from counselor in class, and many met with counselor outside of class; counselors generally worked proactively to identify, resolve issues; students not in course could access college's counseling on their own.	Students could access counseling on their own; caseload for counselors was roughly 1,500:1; counseling role was reactive.
Textbook voucher	Voucher provided to program group students to cover College Success course books.	Voucher provided to program group students to cover College Success course books.	No voucher offered.

SOURCE: MDRC field research data.

learners.”³ The course’s three credits counted toward full-time enrollment at the college, but they could not be applied toward a degree or transferred to another postsecondary institution.

The program model specified that, as part of the College Success course, students would be asked to visit the college’s Success Centers nine times during the semester. Based on the results of skills assessment tests, students would be asked to complete a series of assignments at the Success Centers to improve their math, reading, or writing skills. The assignments counted toward a student’s grade for the College Success course. The program model also specified that the instructor of the College Success course provide extra counseling to participating students, both inside and outside of class.

The key findings about the original Opening Doors program as it was implemented at Chaffey College follow.

- **Chaffey’s Opening Doors program did not fully operate as designed and participation rates were lower than the college and MDRC had hoped.**

Only about half of the Opening Doors program group took the College Success course; thus, the program did not reach many of the students it was designed to serve. Low participation rates likely reflect the interaction of the program’s voluntary nature and the fact that the College Success course did not provide transferable credits and therefore may not have been as attractive to students as some other courses.

Some of the course instructors did not communicate and enforce the course expectation of visiting the Success Centers nine times. Many Chaffey students visit the centers on their own or as part of a developmental course, and, in the end, the program did not increase attendance at the centers as much as expected. In addition, some students in the Opening Doors program received extra counseling from their instructor, but many did not.

- **Opening Doors did not meaningfully improve students’ academic outcomes.**

MDRC compared academic outcomes for the Opening Doors program and control groups to estimate the impact of the program. Tests of statistical significance were conducted to determine whether any differences that emerged were likely to be a result of chance rather than the program. (Differences, or effects, that are not statistically significant may be a result of chance.) The analyses show that Opening Doors did not have a statistically significant effect on the total number of credits that students earned or on their GPA. Furthermore, Opening Doors did not have a statistically significant effect on moving students off probation.

³For more information, see www.oncourseworkshop.com.

Enhanced Opening Doors: How Was It Implemented and Did It Make a Difference for Students?

As shown in Table ES.1, the first semester of Enhanced Opening Doors offered the same components as the original Opening Doors program, but had some key differences. Chaffey administrators were disappointed in the low rate of participation in the original program, and decided to require participation in the Enhanced Opening Doors program. Thus, Enhanced Opening Doors program group members were told that they were *required* to take the College Success course and that their registration would be blocked if they did not. In the end, administrators decided not to implement the block. Interviews with Enhanced Opening Doors program group students, however, indicated that most believed that they were, in fact, required to take the course, based on the messages they had heard during and after study intake.

The College Success course for Enhanced Opening Doors was taught by staff with experience in the original Opening Doors program. The Success Center component of the program was reduced to five expected visits from nine, and the assignments were integrated with themes from the College Success course, rather than being based upon students' assessment results. Enhanced Opening Doors offered a second College Success course in the second semester of the program to build upon what students learned in the first semester.

The key findings about the Enhanced Opening Doors program implemented at Chaffey College follow.

- **Chaffey's Enhanced Opening Doors program operated largely as designed and participation rates were relatively high.**

Approximately three-fourths of the Enhanced Opening Doors program group took the first-semester College Success course. Approximately one-third of the program group took the second-semester College Success course. As was the case in the original Opening Doors program, program group members who did not take the College Success course in the Enhanced Opening Doors program did not receive any program services.

All the College Success course instructors in Enhanced Opening Doors enforced the expectation that students visit the Success Centers five times during the semester. During the first semester of the program, the proportion of Enhanced Opening Doors program group members who visited a center at least once was more than double the proportion of Enhanced Opening Doors control group members. Finally, the Enhanced Opening Doors program consistently provided extra counseling to students who took the College Success courses each semester.

- **Enhanced Opening Doors increased the number of credits that students earned.**

Figure ES.1 shows the number of credits that students earned in their first two semesters in the study (the “program semesters”). The white bar in the figure shows the average number of credits earned by the Enhanced Opening Doors program group, and the solid bar shows the average outcome for the Enhanced Opening Doors control group. The difference between the two groups’ average outcomes is the estimated impact of the program. Asterisks above the bar indicate that the impact is statistically significant, meaning that it is unlikely to be a result of chance.

As shown, the Enhanced Opening Doors program group earned an average of 8.3 credits during their first two semesters in the study, compared with an average of 5.6 credits for their control group counterparts. Almost all the estimated increase of 2.7 credits is accounted for by credits that do not count toward a degree (primarily from the College Success course).

- **Enhanced Opening Doors increased the proportion of students who earned a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher.**

Figure ES.2 (see page 10) illustrates the estimated program impact on GPA over the two semesters after sample members entered the study. The first two bars show the program group and control group average for the “cumulative GPA,” which includes all credit-bearing courses and is the GPA used at Chaffey to determine students’ probationary status. (Recall that students who have attempted 12 or more credits are placed on academic probation if their cumulative GPA drops below 2.0, and they are placed on progress probation if they do not successfully complete at least half of all credits attempted.) As the figure shows, 36.2 percent of the Enhanced Opening Doors program group earned a cumulative GPA of 2.0 (“C”) or higher, compared with only 23.6 percent of their control group counterparts.

The higher cumulative GPA for the program group is partly a result of the grades that they received in the College Success course. The second set of bars in Figure ES.2 shows outcomes for the “degree-applicable GPA,” which excludes grades from the College Success course and other courses that do not count toward a degree (such as other college preparatory courses). As the figure shows, Enhanced Opening Doors also increased the proportion of sample members who earned a cumulative degree-applicable GPA of 2.0 or higher. This finding suggests that Enhanced Opening Doors positively affected performance in courses outside the program.

- **The Enhanced Opening Doors program almost doubled the proportion of students who moved off probation and into good academic standing.**

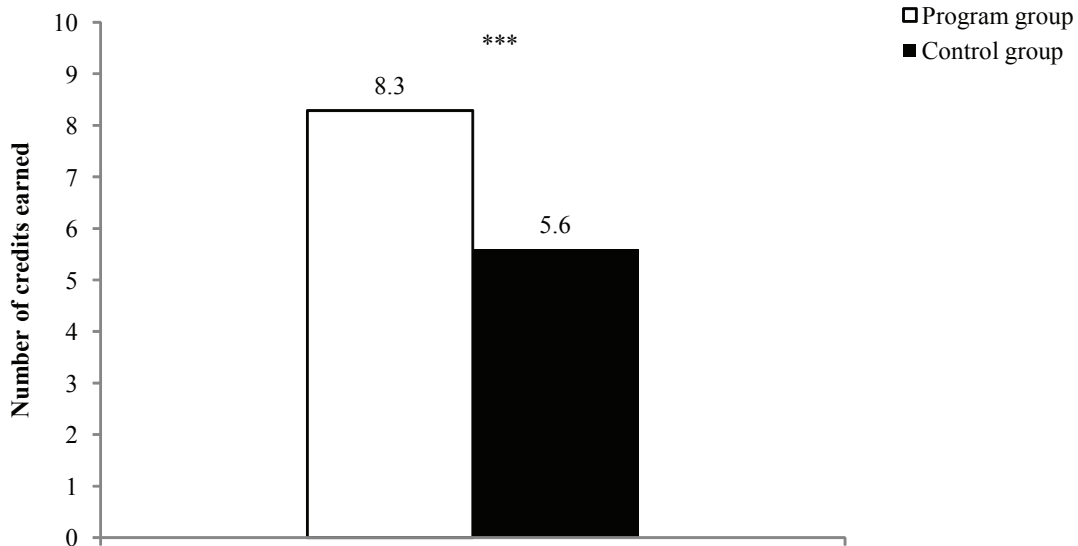
Given the impact on GPA described above, it is not surprising that Enhanced Opening Doors moved many students off probation. As shown in Figure ES.3 (see page 11), 30.4

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure ES.1

Cumulative Credits Earned, First and Second Program Semesters: Enhanced Opening Doors Program

Chaffey College Report



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Chaffey College transcript data.

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

percent of the Enhanced Opening Doors program group achieved good academic standing during the two program semesters, compared with only 15.9 percent of the control group.

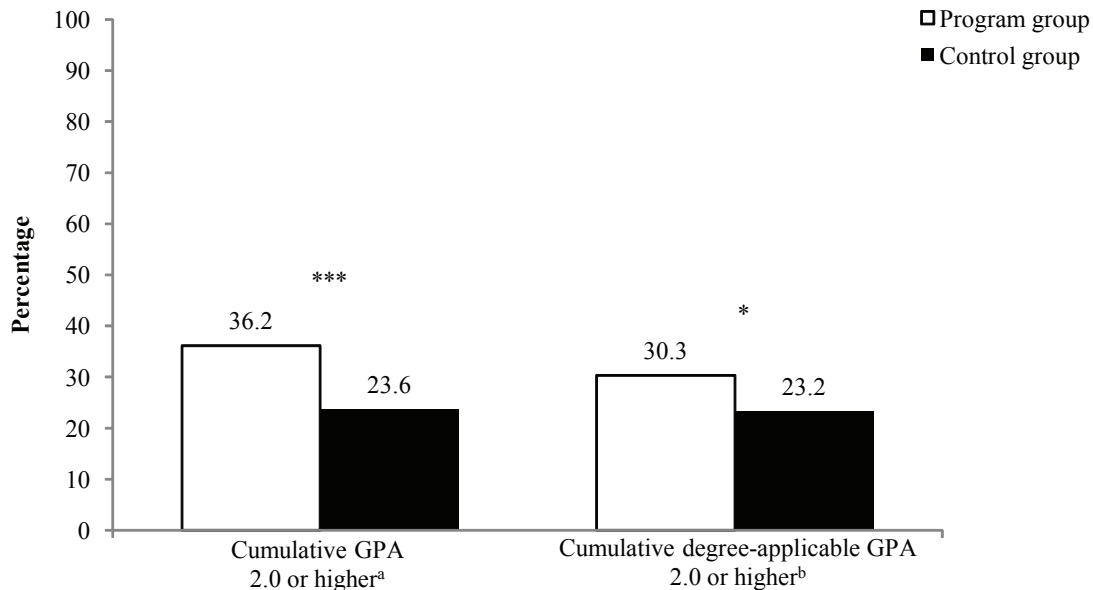
- **Enhanced Opening Doors' more positive effects on academic outcomes might have been driven by the higher rate of participation in the College Success course.**

Enhanced Opening Doors generally had larger effects on sample members' academic outcomes than did the original Opening Doors program. The study was not designed to determine systematically *why* the two programs might have had different results, but MDRC conducted some analyses to shed light on that question. The analyses (which include controlling for

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure ES.2

Cumulative Grade Point Average, First and Second Program Semesters: Enhanced Opening Doors Program Chaffey College Report



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Chaffey College transcript data.

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

GPA = grade point average.

^a“Cumulative GPA” is based on all credit-bearing courses taken during the first and second semesters.

^b“Cumulative degree-applicable GPA” excludes credit from the College Success course and other non-degree-applicable courses.

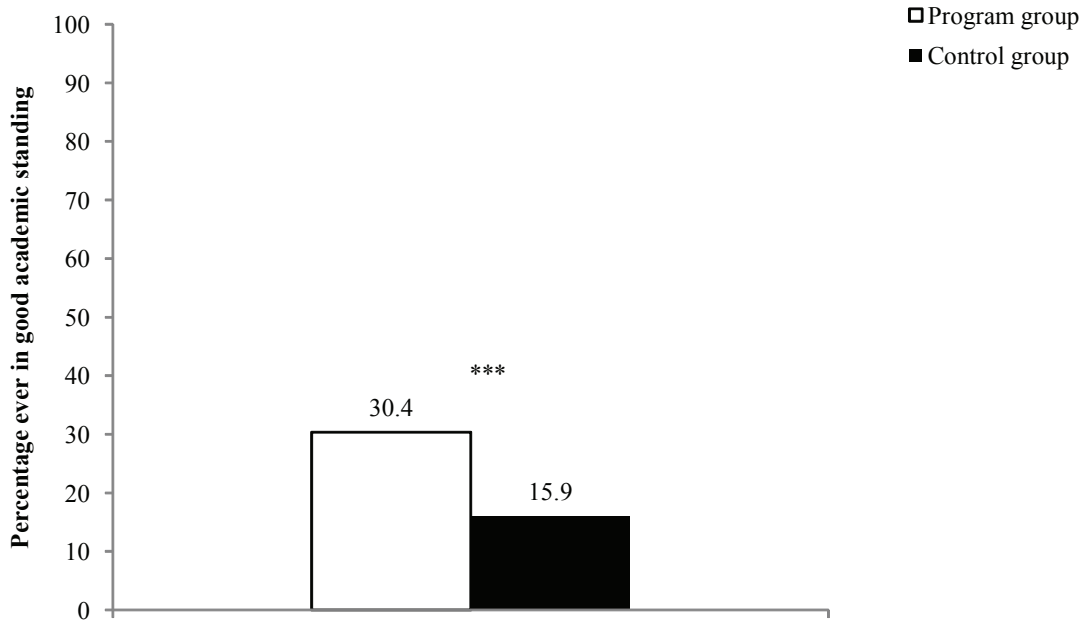
registration in the College Success course and for sample members’ baseline characteristics) suggest that the more positive effects of Enhanced Opening Doors might have been driven by the higher rate of participation in the College Success course. These positive effects do not appear to be caused by differences in the characteristics of the students served by the two programs. Differences in effectiveness might also have been driven by other differences in the implementation of the two programs, although there is no statistical evidence regarding this possibility.

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure ES.3

Students Ever in Good Academic Standing, First and Second Program Semesters: Enhanced Opening Doors Program

Chaffey College Report



SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Chaffey College probation data.

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

What Are the Implications of the Results?

Little rigorous research has been done to understand how to best help probationary students succeed in college, but this study offers some promising evidence:

- **It can be worthwhile to target services to students on probation.**

Past research has shown some positive effects for probationary students who receive special services, but the study at Chaffey offers rigorous, causal evidence that services can make a difference. The program's design and operation, however, are important. Although Chaffey's original Opening Doors program did not improve students' academic outcomes, the college's

Enhanced Opening Doors program helped move students off probation. While further rigorous research should be conducted, this report provides hope for other colleges struggling to help students with substantial academic difficulties.

- **A program like Enhanced Opening Doors may be more effective if it is required.**

Results from this study suggest that requiring participation in a program like Chaffey's may generate larger effects than allowing students to volunteer. By sending the message that participation in a program or a course is required, a college can engage students who would not take part on their own. This approach may offer more room to effect change with probationary students, who have already faced substantial academic difficulties.

- **Other program implementation factors may matter, as well.**

Some differences between the implementation of the two programs may have contributed to Enhanced Opening Doors' relative success. In Enhanced Opening Doors, all the College Success course instructors had experience in teaching the course and consistently enforced the expectation that students should visit the Success Centers. Assignments at the Success Centers were integrated with the College Success course material. Students consistently received extra counseling. Finally, a second semester College Success course was offered.

The study cannot determine the importance of each of the program's different components. Another MDRC evaluation, however, will provide evidence on the effects of a course very similar to Chaffey's College Success course. As part of the Achieving the Dream initiative, Guilford Technical Community College in North Carolina is providing a class for students in developmental classes using the same *On Course* curriculum used at Chaffey. Results from the study will be available by 2010.

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Finally, Chaffey's approach to program development during the Opening Doors demonstration provides a model for continuous improvement of college policies and practices. Throughout the study, Chaffey was committed to evaluation and innovation, with the goal of improving services for probationary students. The college developed the original Opening Doors program, using data about the Success Centers. It then evaluated and improved the model, to create the Enhanced Opening Doors program. After the demonstration programs operated, the college institutionalized a revised version of the Enhanced Opening Doors program, called "Opening Doors to Excellence." Chaffey also developed a similar program, "Smart Start," for new students who are identified through the college's assessment process as being at risk of experiencing difficulties.

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.

