

**Paying for Persistence**  
**Early Results of a Louisiana Scholarship Program**  
**for Low-Income Parents**  
**Attending Community College**

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## Overview

Community colleges play a critical role in American higher education. Because they have open admissions policies and relatively low tuition and fees, they are particularly important to the millions of adults who might lack preparation or otherwise be unable to afford college. At the same time, longitudinal research suggests that nearly half of students who begin at community college do not obtain a degree or enroll in another college or university within six years. Many factors explain the low rate of persistence, including the expense of attending college. Despite financial aid, most low-income students have substantial unmet needs. In 1999-2000, the average community college student receiving a Pell Grant (the primary need-based financial aid program) had an unmet need of over \$3,000, taking into account Pell and all other federal and state aid received.

This report presents the early results of a program in Louisiana designed to help low-income parents attending community college cover more of their expenses and also provide a financial incentive to make good progress. The program, known as Opening Doors, operated at two New Orleans-area institutions — Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson — in 2004-2005, before Hurricane Katrina devastated the region. The colleges offered students a \$1,000 scholarship for each of two semesters, or \$2,000 total, if they maintained at least half-time enrollment and a 2.0 (or C) grade point average. The scholarships were in addition to Pell Grants and any other financial aid for which students qualified and were paid in installments so that college counselors could verify that students stayed enrolled and passed their courses. Most of the program's participants were women who are single parents.

MDRC and its research partners evaluated the Louisiana Opening Doors program using a random assignment research design. Low-income parents who met program eligibility criteria were randomly assigned to two groups: a *program group* that received the Opening Doors scholarship and counseling or a *control group* that received whatever regular financial aid and counseling was available to all students. Random assignment ensured that the motivation levels and personal characteristics of students in both groups were equivalent at the start of the study. By tracking both groups over time, researchers could measure the difference, or *impact*, that Opening Doors had on student outcomes. Analysis of transcripts for students who entered the study in spring and summer 2004 shows that, compared with the control group, students in Opening Doors:

- **Were more likely to enroll in college full time**
- **Passed more courses and earned more course credits**
- **Had higher rates of registration in college in the second and third semesters after random assignment**

While it is too early to conclude that the Louisiana Opening Doors program is an unequivocal success, these early findings suggest that a performance-based scholarship can have a significant positive effect on persistence and academic achievement among low-income parents. Future reports will present program impacts for the full sample on a wider array of measures, including degree completion, transfer, employment, and well-being. Researchers will also investigate how students in Louisiana coped after Hurricane Katrina.



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## Preface

Community colleges, which tend to be more accessible and affordable than other post-secondary institutions, are a critical resource for low-income people striving to improve their prospects in the labor market and in life. Yet nearly half of students who begin at community colleges leave school before receiving a credential. Research by MDRC and others suggests that many community college students want to earn a degree but are overwhelmed by the competing demands of work, family, and school. Institutional barriers, such as poorly tailored instruction, insufficient financial aid, or inadequate advising, may also impede their academic progress. In 2003, MDRC launched the Opening Doors demonstration project to study the effects of innovative programs designed to help students stay in school and succeed. Six colleges in four states are taking part in the demonstration.

This report presents early findings from Louisiana Opening Doors, an enhanced financial aid program targeting low-income parents at two community colleges in the New Orleans area: Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson. This program was designed to help students with their expenses and provide an incentive to make good academic progress. Students randomly assigned to Opening Doors were offered a \$1,000 scholarship for each of two semesters, in addition to the regular financial aid they qualified for, if they enrolled at least half time and earned at least a C average. They also received enhanced counseling. Students in a control group received only regular financial aid and the counseling available to all students.

The early findings in Louisiana are compelling and suggest that a performance-based scholarship can indeed have a positive effect on persistence and academic achievement among a student population that faces multiple barriers to completing college. The students in Opening Doors were more likely to enroll in college full time, passed more courses, earned more course credits, and had higher rates of persistence.

More follow-up is needed to determine the program's longer-term effects. Unfortunately, Hurricane Katrina temporarily shut down the campuses of the colleges in the program and uprooted many, if not most, of the students who took part in the study. MDRC and its research partners, particularly the MacArthur Foundation-funded Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, are working to locate the students. We will continue to report on how they fared in Opening Doors and hope to tell a new story — how they were affected by Katrina.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President



## Acknowledgments

Many organizations and people contributed to the Opening Doors demonstration in Louisiana. A consortium of foundations and government agencies listed at the front of this report provided funding for the evaluation. Money for Opening Doors scholarships and counseling was provided by the Louisiana Department of Social Services through its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Staff at the Louisiana Workforce Commission and the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) helped design Louisiana's Opening Doors program and provided administrative support and oversight for the participating colleges.

Officials and staff at Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson handled the day-to-day operations of the program. We are particularly grateful to Dr. Alex Johnson, Chancellor of Delgado Community College, and Dr. Toya Barnes-Teamer, former Vice Chancellor of District 1 of Louisiana Technical College (and currently Senior Vice President, Academic and Student Affairs for the LCTCS), for allowing the study to take place on their campuses and providing staff and other support. Estella Lain served as Opening Doors Coordinator for Delgado Community College. Kendris Brumfield and later Tameka Bob served as coordinators for Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson. We received assistance accessing student transcripts for this analysis from Jim Grouchey at Delgado Community College and from Danneal Jones and Bianca Davis at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson.

The ambitious and varied work of the Opening Doors evaluation represents a collaborative effort among MDRC and the MacArthur Foundation-funded Research Networks on Transitions to Adulthood and on Socioeconomic Status and Health. We would particularly like to thank Cecilia Rouse of Princeton University, a member of the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, for her thorough review of this report and advice on data analysis.

MDRC Senior Vice President Robert Ivry has been the lead architect of the Opening Doors demonstration since its inception and provided guidance to the team on the design of the Louisiana program and the content of this report. Two former MDRC employees, Melissa Wavellet and Janelle Sagness, set up the study procedures in Louisiana and helped college staff deliver services to students as intended. Colleen Sommo and Jenny Au compiled and analyzed the data for the impact analysis. Early report drafts benefited from careful review by Margaret Bald, Gordon Berlin, Dan Bloom, John Hutchins, Susan Scrivener, Colleen Sommo, and members of MDRC's Education Studies Committee, chaired by Richard Murnane of Harvard University. Margaret Bald edited the report. Kathryn Ferreira provided report production assistance and, with Leo Yan, conducted fact-checking. Stephanie Cowell prepared the report for publication.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the students who participated in the Opening Doors study. All were low-income parents working to earn a college degree, often despite considerable personal obstacles. We hope that the findings from this study will be used to smooth the path for them and others in the future.

The Authors

## Introduction

Community colleges perform an important role in American postsecondary education. They enroll nearly half of all college students nationwide and — because of their open admissions policies and low cost relative to most four-year institutions — are accessible to millions of adults who might otherwise lack the preparation or financial means to pursue higher education. Unfortunately, this open access does not always translate into academic success. National studies indicate that 46 percent of students who begin at community colleges do not obtain a degree or enroll in another higher education institution within six years.<sup>1</sup> Research by MDRC and others suggests that many community college students want to earn a degree but are overwhelmed by the competing demands of work, family, and school. Institutional barriers, such as poorly tailored instruction, insufficient financial aid, or inadequate advising, may also impede students' academic progress.<sup>2</sup>

MDRC launched the Opening Doors demonstration in 2003 to study the effects of community college programs designed to help students persist in school and achieve greater academic and personal success. Six community colleges in four states are taking part in the demonstration: Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson (the subjects of this report); Kingsborough Community College in New York; Lorain County and Owens Community Colleges in Ohio; and Chaffey College in California. Each college implemented an Opening Doors program that involved some combination of reforms in curriculum and instruction, expanded support services for students, and increased financial aid. MDRC is managing the initiative and, with a group of scholars affiliated with the MacArthur Foundation-funded Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health,<sup>3</sup> is conducting an evaluation to determine whether the Opening Doors programs affect students' abilities to complete more courses, earn better grades, and obtain college certificates and degrees. The evaluation is also examining the long-term effects of such enhancements on students' employment, earnings, health, and other measures of personal and social well-being.

To measure program effects, the evaluation is using an experimental research design similar to that used in trials of new medications or therapies. At each participating college, students who agree to take part in the study are randomly assigned to a program group that re-

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2002).

<sup>2</sup>Brock and LeBlanc (2005).

<sup>3</sup>Members of the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood are Gordon L. Berlin (MDRC), Mark Courtney (University of Chicago), Sheldon Danzinger (University of Michigan), Connie A. Flanagan (The Pennsylvania State University), Frank F. Furstenberg (University of Pennsylvania), Vonnice C. McLoyd (University of Michigan), Wayne Osgood (The Pennsylvania State University), Jean E. Rhodes (University of Massachusetts, Boston), Cecilia E. Rouse (Princeton University), Rubén G. Rumbaut (University of California, Irvine), Richard Settersten (Case Western University), and Mary C. Waters (Harvard University). Christina Paxton of Princeton University is leading the evaluation component focused on health outcomes. She is also a member of the MacArthur Foundation-funded Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health.

ceives enhanced Opening Doors services or to a control group that receives the college's standard services. Both groups will be tracked over time to find out whether the enhanced services result in better outcomes for students. Random assignment ensures that the motivation levels and personal characteristics of students in the program and control groups are the same at the beginning of the study; hence, any subsequent differences in educational or other outcomes can be attributed with a high level of confidence to Opening Doors.

This report presents preliminary findings from an enhanced financial aid program targeting low-income parents at two community colleges in the New Orleans area. The goals of Louisiana's Opening Doors program were to help students with expenses that regular financial aid might not cover and to provide a monetary incentive for students to make good academic progress. At the participating colleges — Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson — students were offered a \$1,000 scholarship for each of two semesters (or \$2,000 total) if they met two conditions: They enrolled at least half time and earned at least a 2.0 (or C) grade point average. The Opening Doors scholarships were paid in addition to Pell Grants and any other financial aid for which students qualified and could be used for any purpose. In order to encourage satisfactory progress in school, the scholarships were disbursed in installments so that college counselors could verify that students stayed enrolled and passed their courses. In contrast, students in the control group received Pell Grants and any other regular financial aid for which they qualified but did not receive an Opening Doors scholarship and did not have counselors who monitored their academic performance.

The Opening Doors program in Louisiana was launched in early 2004, and the follow-up period for students described in this report ended in June 2005, or roughly three months before the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. After the storm, about 60 percent of Delgado's facilities were damaged, with the most extensive damage occurring at City Park — the college's largest campus and one of two Delgado campuses studied in this report. Conservative estimates place the damage at Delgado at about \$132 million. In addition, Delgado expects a loss of over \$14 million in tuition revenue from students who will not return, including amounts lost because of tuition refund requests from students and their families.<sup>4</sup> The damage to the Louisiana Technical College system, including West Jefferson and other campuses, is estimated to be about \$18 million.<sup>5</sup> Both Delgado and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson suspended most classes for the fall 2005 semester but have since reopened. Delgado announced that it will have a new focus on technical education in order to meet the needs of business and industry in New Orleans's rebuilding effort.

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<sup>4</sup>Evelyn (2005).

<sup>5</sup>Lederman (2005).

Delgado and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson enrolled many low-income students who lived in the neighborhoods most affected by the hurricane and subsequent flooding. It is clear that this natural disaster has uprooted the lives of many, if not most, of the students who agreed to take part in the Opening Doors study, making the future viability of the evaluation uncertain. However, MDRC and its research partners will continue to try to locate and follow students through surveys and administrative records in order to understand how Opening Doors sample members were affected by Hurricane Katrina and whether they have resumed their college studies in the New Orleans area or elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

This report focuses on the implementation and early effects of the Opening Doors program at the Louisiana colleges before Hurricane Katrina. The second section provides a brief discussion of the federal policy context for the study and why a scholarship program to supplement the Pell Grant program is worth testing. The third section describes the Opening Doors program in Louisiana, including the program's history, participating colleges, target population, and program operations. The fourth section describes the characteristics of low-income parents who applied for the scholarship and were randomly assigned to the program and control groups. The concluding section presents preliminary findings on the effects of the Opening Doors program on measures of student performance and persistence.

## The Policy Context

The primary need-based financial aid program for college students in the United States is the federal Pell Grant program, which makes awards to students based on the cost of attendance at an institution (generally, the sum of tuition and fees; an allowance for books, supplies, transportation, and personal expenses; and a room and board allowance) minus the expected family contribution (which takes into account available income and assets). Since 2003, the average Pell Grant award to students has been just under \$2,500, and the maximum award has been capped at \$4,500. The budget request for the 2007 fiscal year proposed by President George W. Bush does not increase these figures.<sup>7</sup>

Given the high cost of attending college, many Pell Grant recipients have a significant amount of unmet need.<sup>8</sup> This is true even for students at community colleges, where the cost of attendance is lower than at most four-year institutions. In 1999-2000, the average unmet need

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<sup>6</sup>Jean Rhodes (University of Massachusetts, Boston), Cecilia Rouse (Princeton University), and Mary Waters (Harvard University) are leading this effort, which will include structured surveys and qualitative interviews with hurricane survivors. The analyses will use information from the pre-Katrina period, administrative records, and available data from the post-Katrina period to estimate the effect of the hurricane on outcomes.

<sup>7</sup>Burd (2006).

<sup>8</sup>Mercer (2006).

for Pell Grant recipients attending community colleges throughout the United States was \$3,164. This figure takes into account Pell and all other federal and state aid received.<sup>9</sup> On average, the unmet need is higher for independent students — that is, those who are not living at home with their parents — than for dependent students.<sup>10</sup>

A natural question is how students manage to attend college despite unmet financial needs. For low-income students attending college full time, a substantial amount of expenses tends to be covered by student earnings. Some students also receive scholarships from private sources, employer aid, or contributions from family and friends.<sup>11</sup> Over half of Pell Grant recipients also take out student loans.<sup>12</sup> Despite these potential sources of assistance, worries about how to pay for college inevitably lead some students to reduce their hours of attendance (thereby increasing the time it takes to earn a degree) or drop out altogether. In the early stages of the Opening Doors demonstration, MDRC conducted focus groups with low-income parents who were attending or wanted to attend community college. Many of them were worried about the cost of tuition, books, and child care. A number of focus group participants also said that they could not afford to cut back on work hours in order to attend school.<sup>13</sup> In recognition of these problems, MDRC tried to recruit states or colleges that were interested in testing a financial aid supplement into the Opening Doors demonstration.

## Opening Doors in Louisiana

### Program History

Starting in 2001, Louisiana began allocating funds from its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (the cash welfare program that mainly serves single mothers and their children) to help low-income parents pursue higher education through the state's community and technical college system.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, the state offered a tuition waiver and child care assistance to low-income parents who had earned a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate and who met other eligibility requirements. After learning of research findings on the positive effects of welfare-to-work programs that offered welfare

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<sup>9</sup>King (2003).

<sup>10</sup>Choy (2000).

<sup>11</sup>Choy (2000).

<sup>12</sup>Mercer (2006).

<sup>13</sup>Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002).

<sup>14</sup>Like many other states, Louisiana developed a large funding surplus in its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in the wake of rapid declines in welfare caseloads. The federal government permitted states to use TANF funds in many ways, as long as they were used to help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency.

recipients a financial incentive to move into employment,<sup>15</sup> state officials became interested in the idea of developing a similar program that would provide a financial incentive for low-income parents to enroll and make good progress in community college.

MDRC and Louisiana officials began working together in 2002 to design what became the state's Opening Doors program. The essential concept was to provide cash scholarships that would be paid in increments, so that students had to demonstrate their commitment and ability to perform college-level work. Program counselors would monitor students' academic performance and help resolve problems that interfered with school. Given the cost of establishing such a program and the uncertainty over whether it would lead to positive results, state officials decided to pilot the Opening Doors program at two colleges in the New Orleans area: Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson. The Louisiana Department of Social Services and the Louisiana Workforce Commission agreed to fund and oversee the program, while MDRC assisted the colleges with program implementation and conducted all evaluation activities, including random assignment of students to program and control groups.

### **The Colleges**

At the time the Opening Doors study was launched, Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson were strikingly different institutions, even though both were run by the same state system (see Table 1). Delgado was the largest community college in Louisiana, with a total enrollment of approximately 15,000 students. Its main campus, City Park, boasted a number of large, collegiate-style buildings, wide lawns, and stately oak trees draped in Spanish moss. Delgado also had three satellite campuses, though only City Park and one satellite (West Bank) participated in the Opening Doors demonstration. The West Jefferson campus of Louisiana Technical College was considerably smaller, with a total pre-Katrina enrollment of just over 700. It occupied a former high school and had just one main building.

As would be expected for a much larger institution, Delgado offered a wider array of occupational and academic programs. Delgado's catalog listed over 50 programs leading to associate's degrees or certificates; the most popular (by enrollment) were in the health and business professions and the general arts and sciences. By comparison, the programs at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson were exclusively occupational and usually led to certificates, though some led to an associate's degree. Its most popular programs were in mechanics, repair technologies, and nursing.

Of the two institutions, Delgado was the more expensive, with tuition and fees in the 2002-2003 academic year of approximately \$1,400, compared with nearly \$500 for Louisiana

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<sup>15</sup>Bloom and Michalopoulos (2001); Morris et al. (2001).

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 1**

**Enrollment, Completions, Costs, and Financial Aid Receipt at Delgado  
Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West  
Jefferson, School Year 2002-2003**

|  | Delgado<br>Community<br>College <sup>a</sup> | Louisiana Technical<br>College-West<br>Jefferson <sup>b</sup> |
|--|--|---|
| <b><u>Fall enrollment, 2002</u></b>          |  |   |
| Total enrollment                             | 15,121                                       | 713   |
| Full-time students (%)                       | 46.5   | 60.8  |
| Part-time students (%)                       | 53.5   | 39.2  |
| Male (%)                                     | 31.1   | 63.3  |
| Female (%)                                   | 68.9   | 36.7  |
| Foreign/nonresident (%)                      | 3.8  | 0.0   |
| Black, non-Hispanic (%)                      | 40.7   | 56.0  |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native (%)        | 0.6  | 0.1   |
| Asian or Pacific Islander (%)                | 1.8  | 6.2   |
| Hispanic (%)                                 | 3.5  | 11.5  |
| White, non-Hispanic (%)                      | 37.6   | 26.2  |
| Race/ethnicity unknown (%)                   | 12.0   | 0.0   |
| Under age 25 <sup>c</sup> (%)                | 50   | 42  |
| <b><u>Completions, 2002</u></b>              |  |   |
| Awarded an associate's degree                | 912  | 14  |
| Awarded an associate's degree or certificate | 1,077  | 40  |
| Graduation rate <sup>d</sup> (%)             | 2.3  | NA <sup>e</sup>   |
| Transfer-out rate <sup>f</sup> (%)           | 13.5   | 11.6  |
| <b><u>Financial Aid, 2002-2003</u></b>       |  |   |
| Published in-state tuition and fees (\$)     | 1,404  | 484   |
| Federal grant aid received (%)               | 30.0   | 23.0  |
| State/local grant aid received (%)           | 2.0  | 0.0   |
| Institutional grant aid received (%)         | 5.0  | 0.0   |
| Student loan aid received (%)                | 18.0   | 0.0   |
| Any financial aid received <sup>g</sup> (%)  | 36.0   | 77.0  |
| Average federal grant aid (\$)               | 1,796  | 3,938   |
| Average state/local grant aid (\$)           | 702  | 0   |
| Average institutional grant aid (\$)         | 571  | 0   |
| Average student loan aid (\$)                | 1,400  | 0   |

(continued)

### Table 1 (continued)

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

NOTES: NA = not available. Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

<sup>a</sup>Delgado's figures include the City Park, West Bank, and Charity School of Nursing campuses. Opening Doors is operating at the main campus (City Park) and West Bank.

<sup>b</sup>Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson data referring to total enrollment, gender, and race/ethnicity are based on a 12-month enrollment period. Data on full-time/part-time status and age are based on fall enrollment data.

<sup>c</sup>Age distribution is collected in odd years. Consequently, age data refer to 2001-2002 enrollments.

<sup>d</sup>Graduation rates are for cohort year 2000. Graduation rates are determined by those who complete a degree within 150 percent of the normal time.

<sup>e</sup>Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson calculates graduation rates differently than Delgado and cannot be compared.

<sup>f</sup>Transfer-out rates are for cohort year 2000. Transfer-out rates are determined by students known to transfer to another postsecondary institution within 150 percent of the normal time to complete a degree.

<sup>g</sup>Any financial aid includes grants, loans, assistantships, scholarships, fellowships, tuition waivers, tuition discounts, veterans' benefits, employer aid (tuition reimbursement), and other monies (other than from relatives/friends) provided to students to meet expenses.

Technical College-West Jefferson. In that same year, 30 percent of Delgado students received federal financial aid, and 36 percent received financial aid from any source, including state and institutional grant programs. At Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson, only 23 percent of students received federal financial aid, but 77 percent received support from some other source, including welfare or Workforce Investment Act programs for occupational training.

At the start of this study, the two colleges enrolled somewhat different types of students, most likely reflecting the different kinds of instructional programs offered. More than two-thirds of Delgado's students were women, whereas, at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson, the gender ratio was reversed. Delgado served white and black students in roughly equal proportion; in comparison, black students outnumbered whites at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson by more than two to one. Finally, Delgado's students were about evenly divided between those under and over age 25, whereas the majority of students at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson were over 25.

Many of the students at both Delgado and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson came from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Perhaps as a result, college statistics indicate that many students had difficulty completing certificate or degree programs in a timely fashion. According to information reported by Delgado to the U.S. Department of Education, only 2.3 percent of freshmen who entered the institution in 2000 completed an associate's degree within three years. (Comparable data are not available for Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson.) Presumably, many students succeeded in earning degrees within longer time periods, while others either decided to attend other institutions or discontinued their education.

### **Targeting and Enrollment for Opening Doors**

As noted earlier, the Opening Doors scholarship in Louisiana was targeted to low-income parents who enrolled at Delgado's City Park or West Bank campuses or Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson at least half time. To be eligible, students had to meet the following criteria:

- Age 18 to 34
- Parent of at least one dependent child under age 19
- Family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level
- A high school diploma or GED certificate and a passing score on a college entrance exam
- No degree or occupational certificate from an accredited college or university

The Opening Doors scholarship was targeted primarily to incoming students, but continuing students also qualified if they were ready to shift from taking mostly developmental courses to college-level work. Note that while TANF funds paid for the scholarship, families did not have to be on welfare (or have a history of welfare receipt) to be eligible.

Because the Opening Doors program was so new, college staff had to conduct extensive outreach to make students aware of the opportunity and encourage them to apply. The \$1,000 scholarship would seem to sell itself, but staff found that it was difficult to capture students' attention amid all the other activities and information available at the start of each semester. College staff reported that they got the best response after making oral presentations at the mandatory orientation and testing sessions for incoming freshmen. Staff also posted flyers and placed advertisements in newspapers and on the radio. Some students reported that the ads encouraged them to apply to college (see Box 1). Once the program became established, word-of-mouth also helped the recruitment effort.

## Box 1

### A Step in the Right Direction

In early 2004, Michelle Lafayette (not her real name) was working full time and earning \$6.77 an hour. Then she lost her job and was without work for three months, receiving food stamps and struggling to support herself and her 2-year-old child. She considered attending community college after reading a newspaper advertisement for Delgado Community College's Opening Doors program. In an interview, Lafayette discussed how enrolling at community college was a long process. She credited her acceptance into the Opening Doors program with giving her the incentive and support she needed to begin the process and improve her situation.

I was a single, stay-at-home mom without a job. I was unemployed, so I was looking through the newspaper basically on weekdays, and I saw the ad for the Opening Doors program....I came to the Opening Doors program, and I was approved for the Opening Doors program before I was able to be accepted into the school, actually. So that was a step in the right direction for me. If it had not been for Opening Doors, I would have not thought about coming back to the school; I was at the end, I couldn't find a job, and I didn't know where I was going, actually. Now I'm back in school and so, thanks to them, I'm on the right road now....

I don't have a vehicle, so [the scholarship] helped for bus rides to and from school, also for child care, was a great help for child care. Also the counselors seemed very concerned with my education as opposed to just getting me signed up for a program. They were also concerned about my health, you know...and I was surprised with that aspect of the program. It opened doors for lots of other programs, in scholarships. My first semester was the fall last year, and I was an honor student, and so it opened up other scholarship programs for me.

As noted earlier, the evaluation of the Opening Doors program required that eligible students be randomly assigned into a program group that received the scholarship or to a control group that did not. During intake, college staff explained the purpose of the study, collected information on students' demographic characteristics, and obtained their written consent to participate in the research. Although the random assignment process meant that only half the students would ultimately receive a scholarship (since the other half would be in the control group), college staff emphasized that students had nothing to lose by applying. Indeed, every applicant who completed the process was given a \$20 gift card to a major discount store as both an incentive and compensation for their time. Once the paperwork was complete, college staff telephoned MDRC with applicants' names and identification numbers, and MDRC's computer system made the random assignment to the program or control groups. Students were informed of their research status right away, and those in the program group were scheduled for a first appointment with an Opening Doors counselor, usually in the following week.

A total of 1,019 low-income parents completed the application process and enrolled in the study. Sample enrollment occurred over four consecutive terms, beginning with the spring 2004 term. The biggest enrollments into the study occurred in the fall 2004 semester, when most students traditionally start college. Delgado, as the larger of the two institutions, accounted for roughly 80 percent of the total sample.

### **Program Operations**

Both Delgado and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson appointed an administrator to oversee the Opening Doors program and hired counselors to meet with students, monitor academic performance, and disburse the scholarships. The Opening Doors counselors maintained caseloads ranging from about 75 to 150 students. In contrast, caseloads for other academic counselors who worked with students in the control group ranged from 500 to 750 students at Delgado's campuses. Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson had *no* academic counselors outside of Opening Doors. Control group students also did not have anyone monitoring their enrollment status and grades and — perhaps most importantly — did not have the financial incentive provided by the Opening Doors scholarship.

Students in the Opening Doors program received an initial payment of \$250 after the program counselors confirmed with the registrar that they had enrolled at least half time (six or more credit hours). They received a second payment of \$250 after midterms, when counselors verified that the students continued to be enrolled at least half time and were earning at least a C average. A final payment of \$500 was made at the end of the semester, when the counselors verified that the students had passed their courses and earned a grade point average of at least 2.0. During the summer sessions — which lasted fewer weeks than the fall and spring semesters — students were eligible for \$500, and the payments were divided into two parts: \$250 after verification of at least half-time enrollment and \$250 after verification of satisfactory course completion.<sup>16</sup> As noted earlier, the scholarship could be used to pay for child care, transportation, or any other expenses. (See Box 1 for a description of one student's use of scholarship funds.)

The Opening Doors scholarship was intended to give as much of an incentive as possible for students to perform satisfactorily and persist in their studies. Therefore, if students did not earn passing grades at midterm, they did not receive the second \$250 payment but had the opportunity to recoup the full balance if they earned a C average by the end of the semester. Students were also encouraged to reenroll the following semester to earn a second \$1,000 scholarship. (As noted above, the maximum any student could receive was \$2,000 over two

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<sup>16</sup>In the summer 2005 term only, the program allowed students to receive half a scholarship (\$500) if they enrolled for at least three but fewer than six credits. If students enrolled for six or more credits, they were eligible to receive the full \$1,000 and usually received it in two payments of \$500 each.

semesters.) However, if students decided to take a break from school, they were told that a second-semester scholarship was waiting for them if they returned to school and enrolled at least half time. This offer lasted only through summer 2005, when state funding for Opening Doors ended and the program was shut down. (The program closed because priorities changed at the state level, not because of Hurricane Katrina.)

The Opening Doors counselors were encouraged to help students resolve problems that interfered with their academic performance, either directly or by referring them to other campus or community resources. All the counselors performed this function to a degree, though interviews and observations by MDRC staff indicated that most interactions with students were brief. The counselors generally had prior experience working with students or youth but had little formal training in academic advising or social work. Perhaps as a result, they did not usually discuss students' selection of courses or choice of majors, nor did they delve deeply into students' personal lives. Nevertheless, the incremental payment of the scholarship gave counselors at least two or three opportunities to talk with students each semester and to learn their names and faces. Counselors reported that they got to know some students well and would visit with them even after their scholarships ended. Some students also indicated that they felt encouraged and supported by their counselors (see Boxes 2 and 3).

The Opening Doors counselors devoted most of their time to making sure students were enrolled at least half time and earning passing grades. At Delgado, counselors were able to perform this function by using the college's computer system; at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson, the counselors checked with the registrar. At both colleges, counselors reached out to students' instructors at midterm to obtain progress reports and sometimes discovered problems that otherwise would have gone undetected. In some cases, counselors learned that students needed extra help in a subject and referred them to tutors. In other cases, counselors were able to clear up misunderstandings or errors, such as when students thought they had dropped a class but hadn't, or when an instructor made a mistake in recording a student's grade. Finally, some of the counselors used e-mail to notify students of important dates during the semester, such as registration dates for the next term and deadlines for submitting the financial aid application.

In summary, the counseling that Opening Doors provided was more heavily weighted toward monitoring students' compliance with program requirements than advising them on courses or helping them resolve personal problems.<sup>17</sup> Though the counseling could have been more intensive, it almost certainly provided students in Opening Doors with more personalized

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<sup>17</sup>Following visits to observe program implementation, MDRC strongly encouraged college staff to take a more active role in helping students address personal problems that might interfere with school. Not all the counselors were equipped to take on a more expanded role, however, and staff practices did not noticeably change.

## Box 2

### Juggling Work, Child Care, and School

Nicole Jackson (not her real name), a single mother earning \$900 per month, juggled full-time employment, caring for her preschool-age child, and taking community college courses. In an interview, Jackson described the strain she experienced:

It's hard when you're a single parent...and it's very hard to hold the job or have a job, because when you're not in school, you're either taking care of your child or trying to study. It's very hard to find time to do everything.

Jackson continued to explain how she benefited from the individualized guidance she received from Opening Doors counselors when her studies began to suffer. At the school she attended, Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson, the counselor offered a "time management" workshop that she found especially helpful:

If I'm having trouble with subjects, I would go and speak to a counselor. They would ask what are you having trouble with, what is it specifically? We would talk about it, and they would give me ways to improve on that. The workshops helped out a lot, as far as that was a big problem with time. We even had a workshop on how to make time useful.

attention and oversight than students in the control group received. Future Opening Doors reports will provide more information on the nature and frequency of counselor-student interactions at Delgado and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson.

## Characteristics of the Opening Doors Sample

Table 2 presents the characteristics of the low-income parents who enrolled in the Opening Doors study in Louisiana at Delgado and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson. Although the two institutions enroll different types of students, the characteristics of the Opening Doors sample in the two colleges are roughly similar, owing to the eligibility criteria established for the study. The sample at both colleges is overwhelmingly female. A large majority of sample members are black and in their mid to late 20s. Most are unmarried and have one or two children. As noted earlier, it was not a requirement that sample members be on welfare, but about 70 percent of the sample received some type of government benefit — most often food stamps — at the time they enrolled in the study.

### Box 3

#### Overcoming Fear of the Unknown

Before applying to Opening Doors at Delgado Community College, Nandi Lemond (not her real name) had dropped out of high school and had worked part time for minimum wage while obtaining her high school diploma. When she applied to the Opening Doors Program in summer 2004, Lemond had been unemployed for over five years. A single mother, she was getting by with food stamps and Section 8 housing vouchers. She had not taken any college course before joining the Opening Doors program.

My biggest issue, I think, was a fear of not knowing what to expect from college, and it's so many things you have to do, like register, and you have to make sure you have the appropriate classes. [The Opening Doors staff] just advise you. They guide you through the walk of entering college. That was really, really helpful to me because I was always...afraid, you know, to come to college. This experience gave me a lot of confidence. They really kind of guided and refined me in the arena of college. That was the most beneficial thing...aside from the money, which is definitely a help. What made the biggest impression on me were the counselors; they are really concerned. I'm no longer in the program, but I was last semester, and they still contact me and leave me e-mails and check my schedule and check my grades, and that's really a help. It encourages you to be here.

Most of the Opening Doors sample members are financially independent of their parents and almost all have employment experience. Of those who were working at the time they enrolled in the study, average wages ranged from \$7 to \$8 an hour. Roughly four out of five sample members completed twelfth grade and had earned a high school diploma.

The educational goals of students at the two colleges differed somewhat. When asked why they enrolled, 60 percent of the Delgado students said they wanted to earn an associate's degree, and another 18 percent wanted to transfer to a four-year college or university. At Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson, 40 percent said they wanted to obtain an associate's degree, and 28 percent wanted to obtain or update job skills. Another 25 percent of Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson students said their goal was to complete an occupational certificate program.

About one-third of the Opening Doors sample entered the study with some college credits already under their belt. A majority of sample members also indicated that others in their family had attended college. Approximately half of the sample said that they had a working personal computer at home, and a solid majority said they owned or had access to a working car. These data suggest that many sample members had at least a general understanding of the demands of college and could get to campus without having to rely on public transportation.

**The Opening Doors Demonstration**

**Table 2**

**Selected Characteristics of Delgado Community College and Louisiana  
Technical College-West Jefferson Participants at  
the Time of Random Assignment, by Site**

|  | Delgado<br>Community<br>College | Louisiana<br>Technical College-<br>West Jefferson |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| Gender (%)   |                                 |   |
| Male   | 5.5                             | 15.8  |
| Female   | 94.5                            | 84.2  |
| Age (%)  |                                 |   |
| 18-20 years old  | 19.8                            | 10.4  |
| 21-25 years old  | 37.6                            | 28.2  |
| 26-30 years old  | 29.1                            | 35.1  |
| 31-34 years old  | 13.5                            | 26.2  |
| Average age (years)                                      | 24.9                            | 27.0  |
| Marital status (%)                                       |                                 |   |
| Married, living with spouse                              | 7.3                             | 11.5  |
| Married, living apart from spouse                        | 9.2                             | 17.0  |
| Unmarried, living with partner                           | 6.5                             | 6.0   |
| Unmarried, not living with partner                       | 77.0                            | 65.5  |
| Race/ethnicity (%)                                       |                                 |   |
| Hispanic   | 2.9                             | 1.5   |
| Black  | 84.8                            | 85.2  |
| White  | 10.1                            | 11.7  |
| Asian or Pacific Islander                                | 0.4                             | 0.5   |
| Other or American Indian or Alaskan Native               | 1.8                             | 1.0   |
| Number of children (%)                                   |                                 |   |
| None   | NA                              | NA  |
| 1  | 53.9                            | 38.8  |
| 2  | 26.3                            | 30.8  |
| 3 or more  | 19.8                            | 30.3  |
| Among sample members with children:                      |                                 |   |
| Average age of youngest child (years)                    | 3.0                             | 3.6   |
| Average household size (excluding roommates or boarders) | 3.6                             | 3.9   |
| Household receiving any of the following benefits (%):   |                                 |   |
| Unemployment/Dislocated Worker Benefits                  | 3.8                             | 7.1   |
| Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or disability         | 12.1                            | 17.3  |
| Cash assistance or welfare (TANF)                        | 10.0                            | 11.7  |
| Food stamps  | 62.3                            | 60.2  |
| None of the above  | 30.9                            | 29.1  |
| Live in public or Section 8 housing (%)                  | 16.8                            | 20.8  |

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**

|  | Delgado<br>Community<br>College | Louisiana<br>Technical College-<br>West Jefferson |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| Financially dependent on parents (%)                                     | 17.9                            | 14.4  |
| Ever employed (%)  | 97.7                            | 98.0  |
| <i>Among those ever employed:</i>  |                                 |   |
| <i>Number of months employed at least half time in the past year (%)</i> |                                 |   |
| <i>None</i>  | 18.3                            | 16.1  |
| <i>1-3 months</i>  | 20.6                            | 20.3  |
| <i>4-6 months</i>  | 18.1                            | 17.2  |
| <i>7-9 months</i>  | 10.4                            | 10.9  |
| <i>10-12 months</i>  | 32.6                            | 35.4  |
| <i>Number of hours worked per week at current or last job (%)</i>        |                                 |   |
| <i>1-10 hours</i>  | 5.1                             | 5.2   |
| <i>11-20 hours</i>   | 14.4                            | 12.0  |
| <i>21-30 hours</i>   | 26.8                            | 18.8  |
| <i>31-40 hours</i>   | 46.0                            | 50.8  |
| <i>More than 40 hours</i>  | 7.7                             | 13.1  |
| <i>Average hourly wage at current or last job<sup>a</sup> (\$)</i>       | 7.6                             | 7.3   |
| Currently employed (%)   | 51.4                            | 52.5  |
| <i>Among those currently employed:</i>                                   |                                 |   |
| <i>Number of hours worked per week in current job (%)</i>                |                                 |   |
| <i>1-10 hours</i>  | 4.8                             | 4.9   |
| <i>11-20 hours</i>   | 16.8                            | 15.5  |
| <i>21-30 hours</i>   | 25.6                            | 20.4  |
| <i>31-40 hours</i>   | 47.0                            | 51.5  |
| <i>More than 40 hours</i>  | 5.8                             | 7.8   |
| <i>Average hourly wage at current job<sup>a</sup> (\$)</i>               | 8.0                             | 7.1   |
| <i>Respondent or household member receiving (%):</i>                     |                                 |   |
| <i>Unemployment/Dislocated Worker Benefits</i>                           | 1.2                             | 3.0   |
| <i>Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or disability</i>                  | 8.6                             | 13.9  |
| <i>Cash assistance or welfare (TANF)</i>                                 | 4.4                             | 7.9   |
| <i>Food stamps</i>   | 55.2                            | 54.5  |
| Highest grade completed (%)  |                                 |   |
| 8th grade or lower   | 0.6                             | 1.5   |
| 9th grade  | 3.2                             | 1.5   |
| 10th grade   | 4.9                             | 4.5   |
| 11th grade   | 7.6                             | 5.5   |
| 12th grade   | 83.7                            | 87.1  |
| Diplomas/degrees earned (%)  |                                 |   |
| High school diploma  | 77.5                            | 80.2  |
| General Education Development (GED) certificate                          | 18.4                            | 19.3  |
| Occupational/technical certificate                                       | 9.1                             | 12.9  |

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**

|   | Delgado<br>Community<br>College | Louisiana<br>Technical College-<br>West Jefferson |
|---|---------------------------------|---|
| Date of high school graduation/GED receipt (%)                |                                 |   |
| During the past year  | 11.7                            | 6.8   |
| Between 1 and 5 years ago                                     | 33.7                            | 23.4  |
| Between 5 and 10 years ago                                    | 33.7                            | 31.3  |
| More than 10 years ago  | 20.9                            | 38.5  |
| Main reason for enrolling in college <sup>b</sup> (%)         |                                 |   |
| To complete a certificate program                             | 10.8                            | 24.5  |
| To obtain an associate's degree                               | 60.4                            | 39.5  |
| To transfer to a 4-year college/university                    | 17.9                            | 6.0   |
| To obtain/update job skills                                   | 9.7                             | 28.0  |
| Other   | 5.7                             | 7.5   |
| Completed any college courses/credits (%)                     | 34.4                            | 31.2  |
| <i>Among those who completed any college courses/credits:</i> |                                 |   |
| <i>Average number of courses completed</i>                    | 4.0                             | 5.0   |
| First person in family to attend college (%)                  | 42.1                            | 44.6  |
| Working personal computer in home (%)                         | 49.1                            | 54.8  |
| Own or have access to a working car (%)                       | 66.8                            | 77.1  |
| Language other than English spoken regularly in home (%)      | 6.6                             | 9.0   |
| U.S. citizen (%)  | 99.1                            | 98.5  |
| Respondent born in U.S. <sup>c</sup> (%)                      | 98.4                            | 95.0  |
| Respondent or 1 or more parents born outside U.S. (%)         | 4.0                             | 6.5   |
| Sample size = 1,019   | 817                             | 202   |

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Baseline Information Form (BIF) data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 1,019 sample members who completed a BIF and were in the Spring 2004, Summer 2004, Fall 2004, or Spring 2005 cohort.

Missing values are not included in individual variable distributions.

Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Characteristics shown in italics are calculated for a proportion of the full sample.

<sup>a</sup>These calculations are presented only for respondents who reported earning an hourly wage.

<sup>b</sup>Distributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>c</sup>"Born in U.S." includes Puerto Rico.

## An Early Look at Program Impacts

Though it is too early to draw any final conclusions about the effects of Louisiana's Opening Doors program, MDRC has obtained enough data to report on short-term academic outcomes, including semester and cumulative grade point average, semester-to-semester returns (retention), progress toward degree completion (persistence), and passing of developmental courses. These data are drawn from student transcripts provided to MDRC by the colleges. As shown in Box 4, the analysis focuses on the first two cohorts who entered the study in spring and summer 2004 and follows their progress for three semesters.<sup>18</sup> This sample represents 53 percent of the full sample of 1,019 students. The findings suggest that in the short term the Opening Doors intervention resulted in greater full-time enrollment, more courses attempted and passed, and greater semester-to-semester retention among the largely female, single-parent sample. As noted earlier, these findings reflect the period before Hurricane Katrina struck.

### What Should We Have Expected to Find?

The theoretical literature on postsecondary education and training suggests that programs run by community colleges have the potential to help young adults increase their educational attainment, find better jobs, and achieve other positive outcomes.<sup>19</sup> Empirical studies of the effect of college costs generally conclude that as college costs increase, attendance decreases, with much of the decrease occurring among low-income students.<sup>20</sup> Given the large potential benefits of education and the studies of the effects of costs, there are surprisingly few studies of the effects of financial aid on student retention and college completion.<sup>21</sup>

Research by Cornwell, Mustard, and Sridhar (2004) on the Hope Scholarship in Georgia — and by Thomas Kane (2003) on the Cal Grant Program in California — suggest that these merit aid programs may increase college enrollment by 3 to 6 percentage points. Similarly, Dynarski (2000) finds that each \$1,000 in aid given to students in Georgia increases college attendance rates by 3.7 to 4.2 percentage points. In a subsequent analysis of merit aid programs, Dynarski (2005) estimates that such programs increase college persistence rates by 5 to 11 percentage points and that they increase the share of the population that completes a college degree by 3

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<sup>18</sup>As of this writing, complete transcript data are available only for the first two cohorts. MDRC also has scholarship receipt data for Delgado Community College. However, these data were not able to be analyzed for this report. MDRC will provide scholarship information for the full sample in later reports.

<sup>19</sup>See Brock and LeBlanc (2005) for a review of this literature.

<sup>20</sup>For effects of costs on attendance, see Kane (1994) and Dynarski (2003). For a review of this literature, see Dynarski (2002).

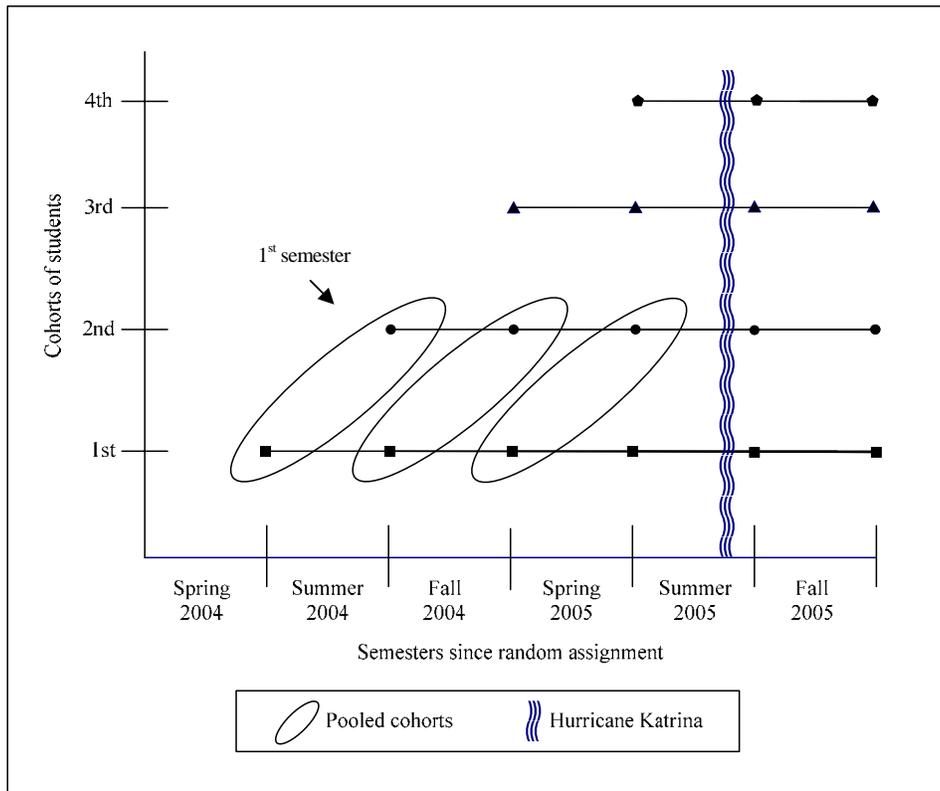
<sup>21</sup>For two such studies, see Angrist (1993) and Bettinger (2004). Angrist shows that an increase in veterans' educational benefits resulted in a corresponding increase in completed schooling.

## Box 4

### Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson Cohorts

The evaluation of the Opening Doors demonstration follows the differences between *cohorts* of students. *Cohorts* are groups of people with at least one characteristic in common. In this demonstration, cohorts comprise students who were randomly assigned into either the Opening Doors program group or the control group at the same point in time.

This research brief presents the findings of the first two cohorts, spring 2004 and summer 2004, which comprise over half of the full sample of students in the Louisiana study (537 students out of the full sample of 1,019). Additional cohorts entered the study in fall 2004 and spring 2005 but are not included in the analysis in this paper. For each semester of findings, the two cohorts are pooled together. The figure below illustrates the process.



For example, first-semester findings consist of the outcomes from semester one of both cohorts. Since Hurricane Katrina occurred in August 2005, the figure illustrates the difficulty faced in analyzing data from future semesters.

percentage points. Dynarski reports that the effects are strongest among women — especially women of color — and are concentrated at the bachelor’s rather than the associate’s degree level. All of these studies use associations or, in the case of Dynarski, nonexperimental techniques to make causal inferences; they do not randomly assign students to program and control groups.

As discussed earlier, Louisiana’s performance-based scholarship was offered to students for two semesters. The \$1,000 per semester is equivalent to one and a half times the stated tuition of Delgado Community College, and more than four times the stated tuition at Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson. The program also provided students with counseling.<sup>22</sup> Given that a large majority of students have difficulty making timely progress toward degrees, it is reasonable to expect that the students in the Opening Doors program group would make better academic progress than their counterparts in the control group.<sup>23</sup> This progress could result from program group students taking more college courses (or spending more time studying) instead of working at a job, or paying for child care instead of assuming child care responsibilities themselves. Additionally, students could do better as a result of the additional guidance available to them.

It is conceivable that the distribution rules of Louisiana’s performance-based scholarship could lead to unintended, conflicting behavioral responses. For example, the rules could encourage some students to enroll in fewer classes per term (since they only needed to maintain half-time enrollment), withdraw from classes when performing unsatisfactorily (to maintain a C average), or select classes with higher expected grades.<sup>24</sup> While these actions would ensure scholarship receipt, they are not the intended behavioral responses sought by the program. If this scenario were to occur, Opening Doors students might withdraw from more classes than their control group counterparts and attain higher grade point averages in the process. The analysis helps to test such hypotheses.

As discussed below, there is strong evidence that Opening Doors students perform better with the program than they would in its absence. There is no evidence to suggest that students are actively withdrawing from classes to maintain scholarship receipt, as theorized above and seen in some programs like the Hope Scholarship in Georgia (which required students to

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<sup>22</sup>Note that while the intervention could extend sequentially through two semesters, program group participants had the opportunity to delay receipt of the second semester of the scholarship until the Opening Doors program was terminated after the summer 2005 term. Therefore, the intervention length could vary from a minimum of two semesters to a maximum of five semesters for students in the first cohort. Later cohorts had between two and four semesters to receive the scholarship. Future reports will indicate the proportion of students who have received the scholarship and finished the intervention within a given semester.

<sup>23</sup>Horn and Premo (1995) show that the following are characteristics associated with leaving postsecondary education without a degree: delaying enrollment in postsecondary education, being financially independent of parents (from a financial aid standpoint), and working full time while enrolled.

<sup>24</sup>Cornwell, Lee, and Mustard (2005).

maintain a B grade point average). However, it is important to remember that these are early findings and that the results may very well change with longer follow-up and the analysis of data from the fall 2004 and spring 2005 cohorts.

## Findings

Table 3 shows the impacts on academic performance during the first three semesters since random assignment for students in this subsample of the first two study cohorts. The first column of the table shows outcomes for the Opening Doors group, and the second shows outcomes for the control group, which represents what would have happened to students in the absence of the Opening Doors program. The third column shows the difference in outcomes between the two groups, or the impact of the program. The asterisks are used to designate differences that are statistically significant, which means that one can be quite confident that the detected differences are real and not due to chance.<sup>25</sup>

The top panel of the table shows the results of the first semester of the program for students who entered the study in spring and summer 2004. In other words, the top panel represents results from spring 2004 for students who entered the program during that time, combined with the results for the summer 2004 cohort (that is, the results for students who were randomly assigned during the summer 2004 registration session). The table shows that, during the first semester of the program, 74.6 percent of Opening Doors students registered for courses, compared with 70.0 percent of students in the control group.<sup>26</sup> The difference in registration of 4.5 percentage points is not statistically significant, meaning that the proportions of the two groups registering are similar. This was expected, in that the Opening Doors scholarship was primarily marketed to students who already expressed interest in enrolling in college. Nevertheless, while overall registration rates were similar, the data indicate that the Opening Doors scholarship induced students to sign up for more credits than they would have otherwise. Significantly more Opening Doors students registered for 12 or more credits, as indicated by the second row of the table, which shows that full-time enrollment is 8.9 percentage points higher in the program group than in the control group.

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<sup>25</sup>Three stars indicate a probability of 1 percent or less that the result is due to chance. Two stars indicate a probability of 5 percent or less, while one star indicates a probability of 10 percent or less.

<sup>26</sup>The relatively low proportion of students registering for courses is due to the pooling of the spring 2004 cohort with the summer 2004 cohort. Students are more likely to register for spring semester classes than summer classes. In the spring 2004 cohort, 88.9 percent of Opening Doors students and 89.9 percent of control group students registered for the spring 2004 session. Analyzing the summer 2004 cohort in isolation reveals that only 66.3 percent of Opening Doors students and 53.8 percent of control group students registered for the summer session (not shown in tables).

The Opening Doors Demonstration

Table 3

**Impacts on Academic Performance During the First Three Semesters Since Random Assignment at Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson: Spring 2004 and Summer 2004 Cohorts**

|  | Treatment Group | Comparison Group | Difference (Impact) |
|--|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <b><u>First semester<sup>a</sup></u></b>           |                 |                  |                     |
| Registered for any courses (%)                     | 74.6            | 70.0             | 4.5                 |
| Enrolled full time <sup>b</sup>                    | 60.6            | 51.7             | 8.9 **              |
| Enrolled part time <sup>c</sup>                    | 14.0            | 18.4             | -4.4                |
| Number of courses attempted                        | 2.5             | 2.3              | 0.2                 |
| Number of courses passed                           | 1.5             | 1.2              | 0.4 ***             |
| <i>Percentage of attempted courses passed</i>      | 64.9            | 52.5             | 12.4 ***            |
| <i>Passed all courses (%)</i>                      | 46.1            | 33.0             | 13.1 ***            |
| Total credits registered (regular + developmental) | 7.1             | 6.8              | 0.4                 |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)     | 4.5             | 3.4              | 1.1 ***             |
| Regular credits earned                             | 3.1             | 2.2              | 0.9 ***             |
| Developmental credits earned                       | 1.4             | 1.2              | 0.2                 |
| Withdrew from 1 or more courses (%)                | 20.3            | 27.2             | -6.9 *              |
| <i>Term GPA</i>                                    | 2.3             | 2.1              | 0.2                 |
| <b><u>Second semester<sup>d</sup></u></b>          |                 |                  |                     |
| Registered for any courses (%)                     | 57.5            | 39.3             | 18.2 ***            |
| Enrolled full time <sup>b</sup>                    | 46.1            | 25.8             | 20.3 ***            |
| Enrolled part time <sup>c</sup>                    | 11.4            | 13.5             | -2.1                |
| Number of courses attempted                        | 1.7             | 1.3              | 0.5 ***             |
| Number of courses passed                           | 1.2             | 0.7              | 0.4 ***             |
| <i>Percentage of attempted courses passed</i>      | 71.1            | 58.8             | 12.3 **             |
| <i>Passed all courses (%)</i>                      | 50.8            | 44.7             | 6.1                 |
| Total credits registered (regular + developmental) | 5.0             | 3.6              | 1.4 ***             |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)     | 3.4             | 2.1              | 1.2 ***             |
| Regular credits earned                             | 2.4             | 1.6              | 0.8 ***             |
| Developmental credits earned                       | 1.0             | 0.6              | 0.4 ***             |
| Withdrew from 1 or more courses (%)                | 20.8            | 16.5             | 4.3                 |
| <i>Term GPA</i>                                    | 2.5             | 2.1              | 0.4 **              |
| <b><u>Third semester<sup>e</sup></u></b>           |                 |                  |                     |
| Registered for any courses(%)                      | 49.1            | 37.9             | 11.2 ***            |
| Enrolled full time <sup>b</sup>                    | 31.8            | 20.9             | 10.8 ***            |
| Enrolled part time <sup>c</sup>                    | 17.3            | 16.9             | 0.4                 |
| Number of courses attempted                        | 1.9             | 1.4              | 0.5 ***             |

(continued)

**Table 3 (continued)**

|  | Treatment Group | Comparison Group | Difference (Impact) |
|--|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Number of courses passed                           | 1.1             | 0.8              | 0.3 **              |
| <i>Percentage of attempted courses passed</i>      | 58.4            | 49.2             | 9.2 *               |
| <i>Passed all courses (%)</i>                      | 38.3            | 24.4             | 13.9 **             |
| Total credits registered (regular + developmental) | 5.4             | 4.0              | 1.4 ***             |
| Total credits earned (regular + developmental)     | 3.1             | 2.2              | 0.9 **              |
| Regular credits earned                             | 2.5             | 1.8              | 0.7 **              |
| Developmental credits earned                       | 0.6             | 0.4              | 0.2 *               |
| Withdrawn from 1 or more courses (%)               | 26.0            | 22.5             | 3.6                 |
| <i>Term GPA</i>                                    | 2.2             | 2.0              | 0.1                 |
| <b><u>Summary Outcomes<sup>f</sup></u></b>         |                 |                  |                     |
| Total number of semesters enrolled <sup>g</sup>    | 1.8             | 1.5              | 0.3 ***             |
| Total credits earned                               | 11.0            | 7.7              | 3.3 ***             |
| <b>Sample size (total = 537)</b>                   | <b>264</b>      | <b>273</b>       |                     |

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the Spring 2004 and Summer 2004 cohorts, which includes sample members randomly assigned between 11/11/03 and 06/16/04.

Outcomes were adjusted for the following differences between research groups: attends West Bank, attends City Park, is in the Summer 2004 cohort, is in the Summer 2004 cohort at City Park, is in the Summer 2004 cohort at West Bank, number of children, TANF receipt, food stamp receipt, public housing receipt, financial dependence on parents, reason for enrolling, gender, and current employment.

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

Outcomes that are shown in italics were calculated only for sample members who attempted one or more courses. Differences between program group members and control group members in these outcomes are not true experimental comparisons.

<sup>a</sup>For the Spring 2004 cohort, the first semester is Spring 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, the first semester is Summer 2004.

<sup>b</sup>Based on the Delgado Community College catalog, students are considered full time if they attempt 12 or more credits during the spring or fall semesters. During the summer semester, students are considered full time if they attempt six or more credits.

<sup>c</sup>Based on the Delgado Community College catalog, students are considered part time if they attempt fewer than 12 credits during the spring or fall semesters. During the summer semester, students are considered part time if they attempt fewer than six credits.

<sup>d</sup>For the Spring 2004 cohort, the second semester is Summer 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, the second semester is Fall 2004.

<sup>e</sup>For the Spring 2004 cohort, the third semester is Fall 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, the third semester is Spring 2005.

<sup>f</sup>For the Spring 2004 cohort, summary outcomes use data from the following semesters: Spring 2004, Summer 2004, and Fall 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, summary outcomes use data from the following semesters: Summer 2004, Fall 2004, and Spring 2005.

<sup>g</sup>Total semesters enrolled includes the Summer 2004 semester.

Despite higher full-time enrollment among Opening Doors students, both groups attempted the same number of courses, as indicated by the fourth row of the table. However, Opening Doors students were more successful in passing courses. On average, after one semester, students in the program group passed nearly half a course more than students in the control group. The italicized figures show nonexperimental estimates of how this occurred.<sup>27</sup> Among those attempting a course, almost 65 percent passed the course with a grade of C or better. Among the control group students, a smaller fraction attained passing grades. These additional courses resulted in more total credits earned, on the order of 1.1 credits, with most of that difference resulting from regular courses (as opposed to developmental courses, which do not count toward degree completion). While students in both groups withdrew from courses during the semester, Opening Doors students did so less frequently than control group students — a difference of nearly 7 percentage points. Finally, the last row of the panel shows that the Opening Doors program resulted in similar first-semester grade point averages.

The second panel of Table 3 shows the second program semester results. Encouragingly, the Opening Doors scholarship had a positive effect on student retention. While the proportion registering in college drops somewhat among both Opening Doors students and the control group, the Opening Doors program results in about 18 percentage points more registrants.<sup>28</sup> Effects of this magnitude are seldom seen in program evaluations that use rigorous random assignment designs. In addition to registration gains, Opening Doors students are more likely than their control group counterparts to register for 12 or more credits, attempt more courses, pass more courses, earn more credits (both regular and developmental), and achieve a higher term grade point average. The last panel of the table shows that the positive effects of the Opening Doors intervention continue to hold in the third semester. Again, Opening Doors results in higher overall registration rates, higher full-time enrollment, more courses attempted and passed, and more credits earned. In summary, Table 3 shows:

- Higher full-time enrollment among Opening Doors students in the first, second, and third semesters after the start of the program
- Higher success in courses (as measured by the number of courses passed) among the Opening Doors students
- More total credits earned among Opening Doors students

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<sup>27</sup>The differences in pass rates between the two groups are not causal estimates because they are limited to those sample members who registered for classes and not the full sample. As shown in Table 3, 74.6 percent of the program group and 70.0 percent of the control group registered for classes in the first semester. Hence, the program group and control group students in this subsample may differ in some characteristics related to passing the course other than the intervention (for instance, they could be more motivated students).

<sup>28</sup>Note that some of this decline in registration is due to students not registering for the summer session.

Figure 1 summarizes the effect of the first three semesters on the total credits earned. The figure shows that the trend for both groups is downward; that is, the number of credits earned declines each semester subsequent to random assignment. This drop in persistence — which is a typical pattern among community college students<sup>29</sup> — could be caused by interference by work or family obligations, other barriers, or dissatisfaction with the college experience. It might also reflect an increase in the difficulty of higher-level coursework encountered in later semesters. Despite the downward trend, the figure shows a consistent gap between the groups. Opening Doors students earned more than three additional credits over the follow-up period. These cumulative credits represent an advance of nearly one-third of a semester for Opening Doors students over their control group counterparts.

### Looking Ahead

While it is far too early to conclude that the Opening Doors program in Louisiana is an unequivocal success, the early results are large and compelling. For example, the third-semester retention impact of 11.2 percentage points is larger than most nonexperimental analyses of other scholarship programs would have predicted.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, the Louisiana results suggest that a performance-based scholarship can have a large, positive effect on academic achievement among a predominately female, single-parent student population that faces multiple barriers to completing college.

More follow-up is needed to determine the program's longer-term effects. While it appears that the Opening Doors program helps students progress more quickly and earn more college credits, there is some evidence that effects started to level off during the third semester after random assignment. In addition, since students often “stop out” of school (leave school and later return) or transfer, the story could change as the later cohorts are analyzed. Unfortunately, the severity of Hurricane Katrina has disrupted the lives of the students and the functions of the colleges to such an extent that some students in the sample may never be found. Nonetheless, MDRC and its research partners are proceeding with a follow-up survey and collecting administrative records to capture academic outcomes not always available through college transcripts (such as transfer to other institutions), as well as information on students' employment, earnings, public assistance receipt, social support networks, civic participation, and health.

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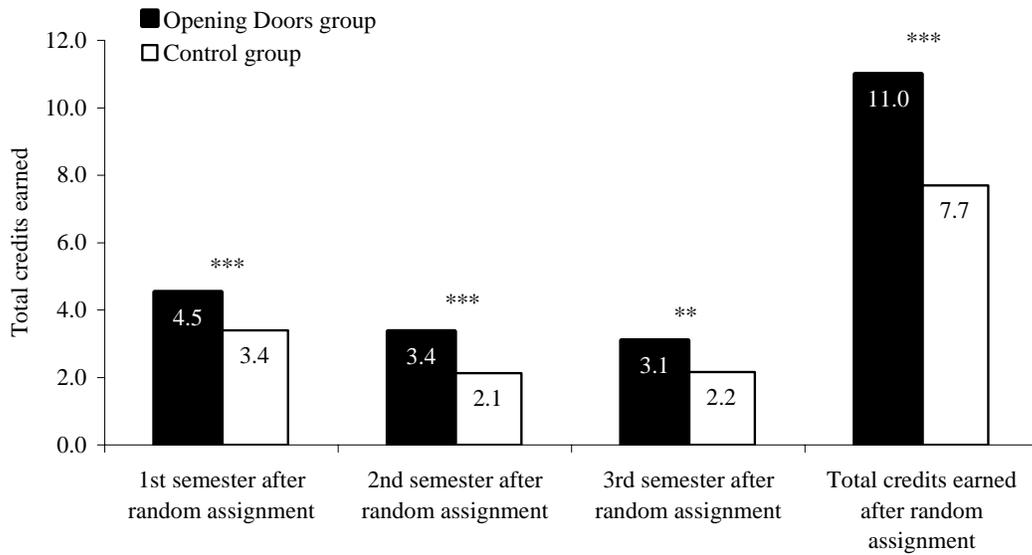
<sup>29</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2002).

<sup>30</sup>While not directly comparable to this retention estimate, Bettinger (2004) finds that a \$1,000 increase in Pell Grant eligibility increases persistence between the first and second year of college attendance by 2 to 4 percentage points. Dynarski (2005) finds that merit aid of about \$3,000 increases the probability of persistence by 5 percent to 11 percent among those who would have gone to college in the absence of the financial aid.

## The Opening Doors Demonstration

Figure 1

### Impacts on Total Credits Earned During the First Three Semesters After Random Assignment at Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson: Spring 2004 and Summer 2004 Cohorts



SOURCES: MDRC calculations from Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson transcript data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the Spring 2004 and Summer 2004 cohorts, which includes sample members randomly assigned between 11/11/03 and 06/16/04.

Outcomes were adjusted for the following differences between research groups: attends West Bank, attends City Park, is in the Summer 2004 cohort, is in the Summer 2004 cohort at City Park, is in the Summer 2004 cohort at West Bank, number of children, TANF receipt, food stamp receipt, public housing receipt, financial dependence on parents, reason for enrolling, gender, and current employment.

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

For the Spring 2004 cohort, the first semester is Spring 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, the first semester is Summer 2004.

For the Spring 2004 cohort, the second semester is Summer 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, the second semester is Fall 2004.

For the Spring 2004 cohort, the third semester is Fall 2004. For the Summer 2004 cohort, the third semester is Spring 2005.



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## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education 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
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- 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.