

Executive Summary

GATEWAY TO COLLEGE

**Lessons from Implementing a
Rigorous Academic Program
for At-Risk Young People**

Jacklyn Altuna Willard
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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY
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Overview

Despite efforts to improve the high school graduation rate in the United States, an estimated 7,200 students drop out of high school every day — a staggering 1.3 million every year. Further, a recent report by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University projects that by 2020, nearly 65 percent of U.S. jobs will require at least some college education, out of reach for those who are unable to earn a high school diploma. Much more comprehensive alternative education programs are needed that put dropouts and students at risk of dropping out on a path to earn high school diplomas while also providing them with the academic skills and support necessary to be successful in their postsecondary pursuits.

Gateway to College provides a comprehensive alternative education program in which students work toward earning their high school diplomas while simultaneously earning credits toward an associate's degree or postsecondary certificate. It is uniquely ambitious in providing struggling students with opportunities often reserved for the highest achievers, in the belief that high expectations and the right support can help more students complete high school and transition to college.

This report describes the implementation of Gateway to College. It has two main goals. The first is to provide an in-depth account of the Gateway to College model and to more precisely define the youth population the program serves. A clearer picture of the service population can provide insight into Gateway to College's unique value and identify the students who might benefit most from it. The second goal is to describe the implementation of the Gateway to College model at three sites, assess the extent to which it is implemented as designed at those sites, and draw lessons for other Gateway to College sites.

The implementation study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the core elements of the Gateway to College model? Whom does the model serve?
2. Were the core elements of the Gateway to College model implemented as planned?
3. What kinds of adaptations were made to meet the demands of the local context and the needs of the local student population?
4. What factors facilitated or impeded successful program implementation?

This study finds that, at a broad level, the three study sites implemented the Gateway to College model as designed. However, Gateway to College struggled with finding the right balance between being flexible and providing concrete guidelines for implementation. The same would be true of any program serving at-risk and dropout young adults that is interested in implementing a flexible model on a large scale, but given the challenges the program sites faced with retaining students, Gateway to College may need to take a close look at which aspects of the model need to be bolstered, consider setting clearer guidelines about what implementation practices are in line with the model's core principles and values, and strengthen the mechanisms by which the program's National Network provides ongoing training and support. All of these are natural next steps in the program's evolution.

Preface

Although the nation has made significant progress in addressing its high school dropout crisis, students who slip through the cracks — those who have dropped out of high school or who are so far behind in credits that they are unlikely to graduate — have very few safety nets and even fewer on-ramps to the road that leads to a college education and a middle-class income. Gateway to College, a dual-enrollment program, is one program that gives young people an on-ramp. In Gateway to College, students who have dropped out of high school or who are at risk of dropping out can simultaneously earn credits toward a high school diploma and a postsecondary degree. Such an opportunity has traditionally been reserved for high-achieving students, not those who have struggled in traditional high school settings, which makes Gateway to College unique and particularly ambitious.

This is the first public report on the implementation of the Gateway to College program. It provides an in-depth description of the Gateway to College model, an analysis of those whom the program actually serves, and an assessment of how well the model was implemented at three program sites. While Gateway to College has grown into a national network, there is scant information about how the program as described on paper is implemented in practice, and about what happens when the model is implemented in diverse settings. Past research tells us that there are often discrepancies between design and implementation, and that these discrepancies can make well-designed programs less effective. While this study does not attempt to measure the program's impact on student achievement, exploring the implementation of the Gateway to College model can begin to reveal the areas of the program model that are promising and the areas that could be strengthened, both in design and in implementation.

In addition, this implementation study explores the challenge Gateway to College faces as a national model that must tread the line between being flexible (as designed) and maintaining consistency in implementation. Many programs struggle to find this balance. While this study reveals that broadly speaking the Gateway to College model is being implemented as designed, it also suggests that the Gateway to College National Network should work on striking a better balance between the flexibility it currently provides its program sites and more concrete guidance to ensure consistent implementation. Finding that middle ground would be an important next step in strengthening the program's implementation and, ultimately, better serving the needs of at-risk young people.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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This material is based on work supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The mission of CNCS is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. CNCS, a federal agency, engages more than five million Americans in service through AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, the Social Innovation Fund, the Volunteer Generation Fund, and other programs, and leads the president's national call-to-service initiative, United We Serve.

The Authors

Executive Summary

This study reports on the implementation of Gateway to College, a program whose mission is to serve students who have dropped out of high school or who are at risk of dropping out of high school by allowing them to earn a high school diploma and credits toward a postsecondary degree. Gateway to College is uniquely ambitious in providing struggling students with opportunities often reserved for the highest achievers; it believes that high expectations and the right support can lead to more students completing high school and transitioning to college.

The Gateway to College program began in 2000 at Portland Community College and has since grown into a national network of 43 colleges in 23 states partnering with more than 125 school districts.¹

Goals of This Report

This report has two main goals. The first is to provide an in-depth description of the Gateway to College model, and to more precisely define the youth population served by the program. This is important because past research suggests that one feature of effective alternative education programs is a “...comprehensive and rigorous mechanism for admitting the ‘right students’ to the program — the students whose characteristics (both positive and negative) suggest that the program has a high likelihood for meeting their educational, personal, and social needs.”² Given the diverse and broad range of young people who fall into the “at-risk” and dropout category, it is important to identify whom Gateway to College actually serves. A clearer picture of this population can provide insight into Gateway to College’s unique value and identify the students who might benefit the most from it.

The second goal is to describe the implementation of the Gateway to College model at three program sites, assess the extent to which it was being implemented as designed at those three sites, and draw lessons for other Gateway to College programs. Previous research has found that dropout-prevention programs have often worked in the past, and that the more effective programs tended to be the ones that were implemented with fidelity (that is, as their

¹Gateway to College National Network, “Gateway to College Locations” (Website: www.gatewaytocollege.org/partner_programs.asp, 2012). Gateway to College had 43 sites at the time the study was being conducted. The current number of sites may vary.

²William E. Davis, Lieve Brutsaert-Durant, and Roxanne Lee, *Alternative Education Programs in Maine: A Further Investigation of Their Impact on Serving Students Considered to be “At-Risk” and Students with Disabilities* (Orono, ME: Institute for the Study of Students At-Risk, College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine, 2002).

designers intended).³ Unfortunately, very few studies of dropout-prevention programs have taken a close look at how programs like Gateway to College are implemented, or have assessed how well they adhere to a core model. As other researchers have described, to understand “what works” for at-risk and dropout young adults in alternative education settings, it is first necessary to understand what programs actually look like when they are implemented. As Berman and McLaughlin write, “The bridge between a promising idea and its impact on students is implementation, but innovations are seldom implemented as intended.”⁴

Background

In March 2011, Gateway to College was awarded a three-year investment of \$3.5 million in grants from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), matched by \$3.5 million from the True North Fund and coinvestors, to further expand its model throughout the country.

This study of the Gateway to College model originally began as a student-level random assignment evaluation of the program’s impacts at nine program locations, with an implementation study included. However, due to program site attrition and challenges with student recruitment, the study shifted in design and is now focused on program implementation at three locations.⁵ The three program sites that participated in this study are located in California, Colorado, and Washington. While a more rigorous evaluation of Gateway to College is still needed to measure the program’s impact on student outcomes, a deeper understanding of how the program model is implemented serves as an important stepping stone.

The implementation study draws on data from a baseline information form, a follow-up student survey administered approximately 12 months after students entered the study, program administrative data drawn from Gateway to College National Network’s management information system, and qualitative data collected during in-person field visits. The qualitative data include interviews with Gateway to College program staff members (instructors, Resource Specialists, directors, and staff members charged with conducting student outreach); focus groups with Gateway to College students; follow-up phone interviews with a subset of control

³Sandra Jo Wilson, Emily E. Tanner-Smith, Mark W. Lipsey, Katarzyna Steinka-Fry, and Jan Morrison, *Dropout Prevention and Intervention Programs: Effects on School Completion and Dropout Among School-Aged Children and Youth* (Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2011, available online at: www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/project/158).

⁴Paul Berman and Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin, “Implementation of Educational Innovation,” *The Educational Forum* 40 (1976): 344-370.

⁵MDRC’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the original study design and protocols. All subsequent changes to the design were presented to and approved by the IRB. There were no significant IRB issues identified.

group students; interviews with postsecondary and K-12 school district partners; program documents such as organizational charts, lists of alternative educational options nearby, and course syllabi; and observations of instruction.

The Gateway to College Model

Gateway to College forges partnerships with K-12 school districts and local community colleges to serve young adults who have dropped out of high school or who are at risk of dropping out. Gateway to College participants are generally enrolled in both the K-12 district and the college at the same time. However, all program activities take place on the college campus.

To be eligible for Gateway to College, a student must be:

- Between 16 and 20 years old
- On the verge of dropping out or already not enrolled in school
- Behind in credits (for age and grade) with a history of absenteeism and a low grade point average
- Living in a partnering school district's service area
- Reading at the eighth-grade level or higher
- Able to earn a high school diploma by age 21

The Gateway to College model consists of five core components:

1. **A learning community with a prescribed set of core courses during the first semester.** During their first semester, called the Foundation term, students take a series of linked classes together as a cohort of 20 to 25 students. The classes include developmental reading and writing (sometimes combined into a single English Language Arts class), math, and college preparatory courses taught primarily by Gateway to College instructors.
2. **Instruction and support based on the Gateway to College Principles of Teaching and Learning,** a set of guiding principles that inform instructors' interactions with students.⁶

⁶The principles are: (1) creating an integrated, outcomes-based curriculum; (2) maintaining a rigorous learning environment; (3) creating collaborative and inclusive learning communities that are respectful and
(continued)

3. **Comprehensive support services, particularly during the Foundation term.** These support services are provided primarily by Gateway to College Resource Specialists who serve as counselors/advisers and advocates. Instructors may also provide support services, but this is considered to be the primary role of the Resource Specialists.
4. **A transition to mainstream community college classes in students' second term.** After successfully completing the Foundation term, students take standard community college classes with other community college students. At this time, students are no longer in a learning community, but may maintain contact with Gateway to College staff members and students.
5. **Training and support for Gateway to College staff members.** Gateway to College programs' staff members spend six to nine months in intensive training when programs first join the Gateway to College National Network. Staff members continue to receive technical assistance from the National Network through the first two years of operation. After two years programs transition to "veteran" status: They continue to have access to services from the National Network as needed, but do not typically receive the same level of technical support.

Main Findings

Given the small number of program sites that ultimately ended up participating in this study, the findings outlined in this report are not broadly generalizable. However, those findings do point to important lessons related to the program model and its implementation, which can serve as launching points for further exploration and discussion.

- **The population served by Gateway to College at these three program sites is both challenged and promising.**

While the students served by Gateway to College at these three program sites are behind in credits and demonstrate troubling behaviors such as low grades and poor attendance, they should also possess a certain level of maturity, motivation, and readiness to commit to a rigorous academic program like Gateway to College.

Most of the students who enrolled in Gateway to College at the three study sites were typically still enrolled in education or had only very recently dropped out of high school (that is,

focused on solutions; (4) pursuing relevant, project-based learning; (5) constructing meaning — that is, helping students solve new problems by drawing on previous experiences; (6) encouraging personal growth; and (7) embedding assessments in the curriculum.

within the previous six months). Students who enrolled in the program at these three locations had usually not been disconnected from education for long periods. This is likely influenced by the program's recruitment practices, which rely heavily on referrals from partnering school districts. This finding suggests that, in practice, Gateway to College at the three study program sites has a stronger focus on dropout prevention than dropout recovery.⁷

- **At a broad level, the three Gateway to College program sites that participated in this study implemented the core model as designed.**

The three program sites participating in this study were able to implement the core model as designed, with some local variations. Given the level of flexibility inherent in the model, these local adaptations do not necessarily undermine the program's implementation fidelity. Rather, the local adaptations are seen as important attributes of the program. Program sites' diverse postsecondary contexts and varying target populations mean that local programs must exhibit considerable flexibility.

Variations in implementation among the three program sites occurred in (1) how the career development course was implemented, (2) how the learning communities were formed, (3) how instructors viewed their role, (4) how programs interpreted what project-based learning should look like in the classroom, and (5) the rates at which students transitioned to mainstream community college.

Another important adaptation to the model that was present at all three program sites was the implementation of a transition course after the initial Foundation term. Program sites recognized the need for an additional mechanism to stay in contact with students beyond the Foundation term, and all decided to make this adaptation to the model to better serve their students.

Local variations in implementation at the three program sites were driven primarily by three factors: (1) the need to align program operations with the practices and priorities of postsecondary host institutions, (2) variations in student needs, and (3) variations in interpretations of certain principles of the model.

- **The strong relationships between program staff members and students are among the model's areas of strength. The program as implemented in these three locations also succeeds at maintaining a shared culture of support for students and pedagogy that focuses on helping students find solutions to their problems.**

⁷Dropout recovery focuses on providing pathways for students who have already dropped out of high school to return to a formal education setting.

Most students in the program reported strong relationships with Gateway to College instructors and Resource Specialists. Students at the three study sites especially appreciated being treated with maturity and respect by the program's staff. If they started to fall behind, program staff members worked with them to identify ways of mitigating challenges rather than chastising them or solving the problem for them. Students at the three study sites also appreciated being in an environment of like-minded students who were motivated to graduate high school and pursue postsecondary degrees.

- **The biggest challenges that Gateway to College faced at these three program sites were retaining students during the initial (Foundation) term and ensuring their transition to the mainstream community college.**

At two of the program sites, the proportion of students who left the program after one semester was very high (44 percent at the Washington program and 46 percent at the California program). By the second semester, enrollment rates across the three programs ranged from 47 percent to 79 percent and by the third semester, enrollment rates ranged from 25 percent to 46 percent. Fewer than half of the students at the three program sites were able to pass all of their Foundation courses and successfully transition to mainstream community college. The biggest academic stumbling block for them was English Language Arts. Fewer than half of all Gateway to College students passed their Foundation English course.

According to the student follow-up survey, most students who left the program without receiving a diploma did so because of personal circumstances such as health problems, family issues, or conflicts with work.

- **Given the challenges and wide range in retention and transition rates across the three program sites, Gateway to College may want to consider additions to strengthen the model. These additions may need to be supported with more explicit guidance about implementation and technical assistance from the National Network.**

A few possible ways the model could be strengthened include: (1) capitalizing more on students' already strong relationships with staff members and fellow students in order to better identify and mitigate potential barriers to retention and transition; (2) bolstering academic support, particularly in the area of English Language Arts; (3) strengthening peer support; (4) extending the learning community experience (as these three program sites have already begun to do); and (5) implementing a systematic approach to listening to student needs to ensure that program practices are in alignment with their diverse circumstances. It is also still an open question whether the model could benefit by better identifying the types of students who are likely to do well in the program.

When it comes to guidance, the National Network could provide program principles that are more concretely codified and that are supported by examples of how essential elements of the model should be implemented (along with examples of how they should not be implemented). This guidance could also include a more standardized process for providing program-site-specific technical assistance and better mechanisms for ensuring increased participation in the training and professional development provided by the National Network.

The Gateway to College National Network has not traditionally focused on ensuring consistency in implementation. Its role has been primarily to help new program sites launch their iterations of the model, to provide a rigorous training regimen during program sites' early years, and to provide technical assistance as needed. In the next phase of the program model's growth and development, Gateway to College may need to take more active steps to ensure a better balance between local flexibility and consistent, high-quality implementation. Doing so would represent a natural next step in the program model's evolution and one in line with the National Network's current thinking. According to the Gateway to College Annual Report, the National Network is currently exploring the creation of a certification system that would define, standardize, and track continuous improvement at Gateway to College program sites.⁸

- **From students' perspectives, Gateway to College fills an important niche: It provides a mature and respectful learning environment for at-risk young people who are ready, willing, and able to commit to a rigorous academic program and who are interested in pursuing a post-secondary education.**

Several other nontraditional educational programs serving at-risk young adults operate within the three Gateway to College program sites' service areas. Other alternatives include online/blended programs, alternative high schools, and adult basic education. None of these other options offers a comprehensive alternative in the eyes of Gateway to College students in those three service areas.

Conclusion

Overall, this study of the Gateway to College model finds that, broadly speaking, the program at the three study sites was implemented as designed. However, the challenges and wide range in retention and transition rates across the three study sites suggest two things: First, programs serving at-risk and dropout young adults that are interested in implementing a flexible model may need to strike a better balance between being flexible and providing concrete guidelines for

⁸Gateway to College National Network, *10 Years of Impact: 2013 Annual Report* (Portland, OR: Gateway to College National Network, 2013).

implementation. Second, Gateway to College may need to take a closer look at which aspects of the model need to be bolstered, consider setting clearer guidelines about what implementation practices are in line with the model's core principles and values, and strengthen the mechanisms that allow the National Network to provide ongoing training and support. All of these are natural next steps in the program's evolution.

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.

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