



# Changing the Odds for Students: Spotlight on Kingsborough College

## Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26

This is the third in a series of publications focused on postsecondary success, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Brooklyn, N.Y — When Regina Peruggi became President of Kingsborough Community College in 2004, the school's graduation rate hovered at just under 25 percent, mirroring that of similar institutions nationwide. Kingsborough had a dedicated faculty and staff, and a range of supports were available on campus. Many isolated interventions had been tried. But after years of bare-bones budgets and underprepared students, college leaders, in their own words, became lulled into believing they were doing the best they could, given the circumstances.

Most of Kingsborough's 17,500 degree-seeking students are poor. The majority fail one or more entrance exams in English or math, so four of every five must take remedial classes before starting to earn credits. They hail from roughly 150 different countries. Despite these challenges, Kingsborough was faring about average nationally in terms of retention and persistence, and that status allowed a business-as-usual approach to persist.

When Peruggi came on board, she and her leadership team engaged faculty, staff and students; questioned long-held assumptions; and made reversing business as usual a top priority. Her leadership fostered the redesign of whole divisions and the creation of new services. Classroom practices shifted. The college revamped admissions and advising, and centralized enrollment

services – moves that changed institutional culture and integrated disparate best practices into a more cohesive whole. The entire institution became focused on student success, and no part remained unchanged.

This brief focuses on effective leadership as a critical lever for changing practices and improving student outcomes in higher education (see figure 1)<sup>i</sup>. Kingsborough's leaders took aim at student success. They began questioning assumptions about why some students did not continue their studies, and the implications of what they learned butted up against established ways of doing business.

The results? They're promising and continuously improving. The leadership at Kingsborough has driven changes in institutional supports and process that have improved students' integration into college and in their achievement. A rigorous external evaluation of Kingsborough's "learning communities" model – described in detail later – shows that participants have higher course pass rates and earn more credits than similar, non-participating students. Over the past six years, retention rates have increased from 64 to 70 percent. The graduation rate has increased from 25 to 35 percent, eight points higher than any of the sister community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system and among the highest in the nation for community colleges.

**EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Ready by 21 uses these interconnected gears to illustrate the changes needed to improve youth outcomes at a large scale.  
The theory: Moving the small gear makes a big difference.

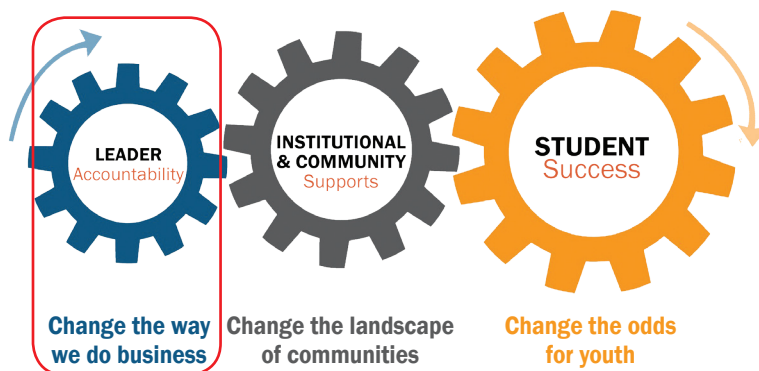


Figure 1<sup>i</sup>

## Bold Leadership

A native New Yorker with experience leading city institutions and expanding programs while balancing budgets, Peruggi began her tenure with a focus on reducing the dropout rate. Moved by data suggesting that approximately three-quarters of students who leave do so for non-academic reasons – transportation, money shortfalls, lack of child care – Peruggi charged her leadership team with comprehensively addressing a range of student needs. Strategies focused on increasing supports that influence persistence and progress. Data would be used to confirm efficacy. Every unit of the college was affected. Several of Peruggi’s leadership strategies stand out as critical to turning the tide at Kingsborough:

- Resetting the goals, expectations and supports for students to persist and complete;
- Establishing a cabinet-level coordinating group to oversee an institutional shift to a “whole student support” model;
- Improving the use of institutional data to identify barriers and evaluate initiatives in support of student persistence and completion; and
- Shifting from categorical funding streams to flexible resource allocation practices.

### Resetting Goals, Assuming Completion

Over the past six years, everything has been up for examination. More than two-thirds of freshmen struggle with English? Change the policy to require all incoming students to take English and restructure learning communities to accommodate more freshmen. Large policy changes like these affect other parts of the system, requiring deep shifts in institutional response – revamping registration, changing the faculty composition of whole departments and modifying advising to meet newly identified student needs.

### High Level Coordination

One of the most important drivers of change has been the “jigsaw” taskforce, a leadership body charged with coordinating and integrating student supports and services. The whole-student support model at Kingsborough is built on “high impact practices” such as on-demand registration and advising, scheduling informed by student data on achievement and progression, coordinated support services,

and intensive learning communities. This leadership group provides the mechanism for pulling these pieces together to have the most powerful impact on student success.

The task force includes division heads from academic affairs, student services, registration, admissions and financial aid, and institutional research. A smaller core team guides the process and sets direction for institutional changes in policy and pedagogy. The group gathers weekly to look at student progress and discuss institutional issues ranging from course requirements to the college calendar, always questioning whether practices and structures promote or inhibit student progress.

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The team is intentional about examining the implications of new policies on instruction, and works to ensure pedagogy is consistent with educational goals and achievable with existing resources. They also grapple with the funding implications of instructional innovation and consider sustainability from the start. David Gomez, Vice President for Academic Administration, states, “Even in cases where we have sought a grant, the day after the check comes we are immediately looking at options for institutionalization if it is an initiative worth continuing.”

### Making Data Central

Data collection plays a key role in ensuring that each unit can function and that the work of different units adds up to a cohesive whole. The registrar shares information in aggregate and at the individual student level with every unit, not just academic affairs, ensuring faculty and staff have real-time information for advising and intervening when students need support. Such data allow advisors to look at student performance over time, administrators to assess whether certain course-taking patterns increase persistence, and financial aid committees to see when students who are otherwise in good standing don’t register for the next term because of outstanding fees of as little as \$250.

The Dean of Institutional Research sits in on most high-level gatherings, including regular meetings convened by the President, signaling an institutional commitment to using data to inform planning and decision-making. This shift has been driven in part by the larger CUNY system as well as by changes in the accreditation process that encourage colleges to focus on student retention.

CUNY has placed increased emphasis on institutional data collection and use for all of the colleges and universities within its system. Common performance indicators focus on retention, graduation and transfer rates. That system-level culture of evidence has trickled down to campuses and, in some cases, to individual divisions. At Kingsborough, it provided the perfect backdrop for leaders to expect and embrace the use of data in all major institutional decisions. Provost Stuart Suss explained, “The whole culture of evidence requires that you look beyond anecdotes. We don’t move without looking at the baseline and history of the data trend.”

### Rethinking Resource Allocation

Kingsborough’s comprehensive commitment to increasing student success quickly led to hard questions about personnel and budget. The strong focus on data provided leaders with the information and credibility necessary to challenge business-as-usual resource allocation practices. A data-driven yet flexible approach evolved, allowing leaders to allocate resources in creative, targeted ways. Personnel vacancies in one unit may result in new hires in an entirely different unit based on the academic needs of incoming freshmen. For example, a vacancy in the biology department may be converted to a new mathematics hire to meet increased student needs for math instruction.

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Such coordination even occurs across academic and student affairs, two traditionally separate camps within higher education. “Two weeks after coming on board,” recalled Dean of Student Affairs Paulette Dalpes, “the director of academic affairs pulled me aside to tell me she was giving me two advisor positions. Instead of those

resources automatically staying in academic affairs, they used the money to fund positions on the student affairs side because that’s where the need was greatest. That’s almost unheard of in any other place I’ve served.”

No major new infusion of resources is driving institutional change at Kingsborough. “Most of this we’ve done without increasing our resources,” Dalpes said. “Our goals are to figure out where the openings are.”

## Strong Supports

Changes in institutional leadership have led to concrete changes in the campus community (see figure 2).<sup>ii</sup>

Leaders wondered: Why not require students to take certain courses in ways we know benefit them? Why not reorganize the college calendar to promote student progress? The approach that Perrugi brought to Kingsborough and embedded within her team has resulted in concrete changes to the student experience that begin well before students set foot on campus.

The college’s commitment to making “the first step the best step,” as Academic Affairs Director Rachel Singer put it, starts with strategies like on-demand registration and scheduling, and continues once students enter the classroom, through structured learning communities and linked courses. Most recently, Kingsborough began bringing developmental courses to local high school students before they begin college and creating direct routes into one of many learning communities available once they reach campus.

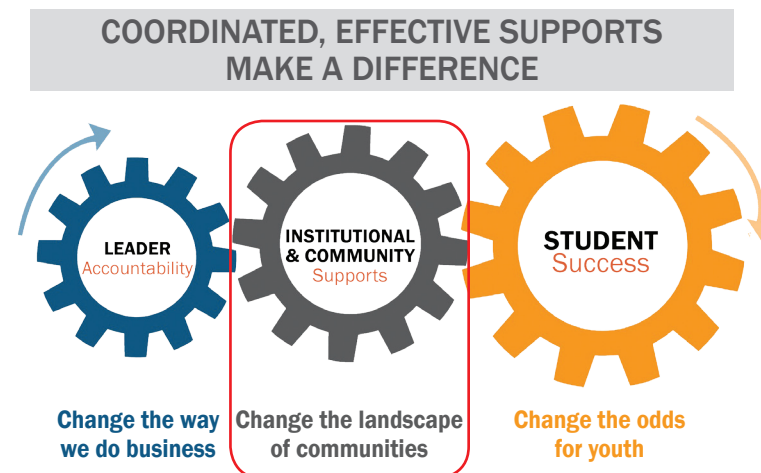


Figure 2<sup>ii</sup>

In this section we highlight several specific strategies that reflect Kingsborough’s whole-student approach:

- Coordinated enrollment services;
- Single Stop center;
- Learning communities;
- Case management;
- President’s Prep.

### ■ Coordinated Enrollment Services

The Village Center for Enrollment Services, where admissions and financial aid are co-located with other related offices, is where Kingsborough’s commitment to fostering early and sustained personal connections begins. Eighty-five percent of students complete the on-demand admissions, advising and registration processes well before their first semester starts, and all three steps can happen in a single campus visit.

Advisors first meet students during the recruitment and registration process, often months before they arrive on campus, putting a “human face” on what can be an impersonal and bureaucratic experience. Students can meet with an advisor twice before their first semester officially begins. Many receive help navigating developmental education requirements and creating an alternative schedule that works with their other commitments.

### ■ Single Stop

Once students are on campus, the Single Stop center serves as their one-stop connection to address a wide range of non-academic needs. To help students navigate challenges and to provide as seamless an experience as possible, Kingsborough and several other community colleges partner with Single Stop USA, a national nonprofit committed to helping low-income people access what can be life-changing public benefits. <sup>iii</sup>

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The center helps students deal with everything from practical to complex circumstances that result in barriers to college persistence. Two full-time staff members provide debt counseling and tax preparation; assist with finding child care, housing and social services; and help students find employment that is compatible with the demands of school and life. Students can also get help with things like eye glasses and emergency food.

The decision to prioritize the delivery of basic supports like these came in response to data suggesting that a significant percentage of students couldn’t register because of outstanding balances of less than \$250. During 2010 alone, the Single Stop center helped students recover over \$1.1 million in benefits and tax refunds – money that has made the difference between staying and dropping out for many students.

### ■ Learning Communities

One reason that understanding and communication has improved between academic and student affairs at Kingsborough is that goals that are traditionally relegated to one unit or the other are embedded in the learning experience. Learning communities are a hybrid strategy that straddles the academic and social needs of students. Students are placed into cohorts that participate in common courses, with things like mandatory computer labs and study skills sessions integrated into instruction.

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“Linked courses” are groups of courses that students in a learning community take together. Instructors develop aligned courses that foster integration of content and experience. One example: a psychology class and an English course that are linked to a “learning styles” course taught by the Student Development unit. Jason VanOra, professor of psychology at Kingsborough, explained, “I’m covering Gardner’s emotional intelligences, while in the English course they are reading *Multiple Intelligences*. That

content is linked to stuff I’m discussing in class. Meanwhile, the Student Development course engages students in identifying their own learning styles.” A linking theme or big-picture question is attached to the trio of courses. In VanOra’s case, it’s, “So what? Why does an understanding of learning styles matter for my individual development?”

“The linked courses are professionally and intellectually stimulating,” said VanOra. “I know my linking faculty really well – and that almost never happens across disciplines. I get to see my students for more than just the three hours that they are in my class. I get students working at a higher level when I’m teaching linked courses.”

Student experience mirrors VanOra’s observations. Learning community students report higher engagement with coursework, instructors and peers, and a stronger sense of belonging than non-participants. They are more likely to say their courses require critical thinking and to rate their college experience as “good” or “excellent.” One student described it this way: “It’s like it’s all one class but different subjects. You can study easier. Use what you learned here and here. It’s like a web, it’s all connected.”

After planning together, faculty stay connected throughout the semester, attending each other’s classes and jointly facilitating tutoring sessions. Faculty drive the development of linked courses, and approximately one-third of the faculty are engaged in learning community courses. To support this approach and foster cross-disciplinary dialogue about teaching and learning, the college created the Center for Teaching and Learning.

In some cases tutors are embedded within classes, serving as model students and supporting in-class writing, troubleshooting when students have difficulty and helping make connections to other courses. Tutors often participate in faculty meetings and other conversations about teaching and learning. Learning communities also typically have scheduled lab hours for students to strengthen their understanding of course content.

Since their inception in 1995, learning communities have helped students succeed. In 2003 the research firm MDRC conducted a large-scale experimental evaluation of the learning communities approach at Kingsborough. It found that over three semesters, participants passed out of developmental education courses more quickly,

obtained higher GPAs and attained more overall college credits than their non-participating counterparts.<sup>iv</sup> The approach has expanded to over 40 learning communities serving roughly 1,000 students annually, including ESL, first-year and career-focused cohorts. Further expansion is being planned, so that the 80 percent of incoming freshman who need at least one developmental course will have access to the learning community experience.

### ■ Case Management

Case management is critical to the success of the learning communities approach. Case managers are the primary link between students’ lives and the classroom. Case managers make contact with students well before classes begin and often are the first to expose students to the high performance expectations associated with postsecondary education. They are proactive about helping students understand those expectations and take responsibility for their own learning.

Once students are in the classroom, case managers work in concert with instructors to assist students with academic skills (e.g., preparing for class, studying, class participation) and managing day-to-day issues that impact their ability to meet the demands of school. Six full-time and two part-time case managers work in concert with faculty to support over 700 students each semester.

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Case managers have also played a critical role in creating a culture of student support across campus. Rachel Singer, Director of Academic Affairs, reflected, “Most faculty have a desire to help students, but don’t always have the tools.” Case managers provide a bridge between the classroom and the myriad and sometimes complex issues students face in the rest of their lives. Vice President Gomez adds, “This role has been critical to changing faculty perceptions of student services. Now faculty members hear specifically about how they can help struggling students. The case manager is really what has allowed faculty to know how to help.”

## ■ President's Prep

The shifts that led to early and sustained support for students have extended beyond campus as well. In 2009, Kingsborough established President's Prep, a "pre-freshman" program to reduce the time students spend in developmental education by working with them before they become college students.

Why wait until students enter college to test and place them into remedial courses? Especially given how poorly students who begin college with even one developmental course requirement tend to fare. High school students take an assessment similar to the one that admitted college students take to determine their need for developmental courses, then participate in six-week intensive after-school courses in English and math.

Students are retested to determine their prospective placement at Kingsborough, and are then eligible to participate in one of the college's learning communities. President's Prep is now being piloted during the junior and senior year of high school. Kingsborough hopes that the program will increase college readiness and improve the likelihood that students earn a degree. Early results suggest President's Prep students have higher persistence rates than their counterparts who don't participate in the program.

## ■ Student Success

At the core of Kingsborough's mission is a belief that every student can learn and succeed. The institution's commitment to that belief and corresponding investments in student success are creating a new type of student experience that appears to be having a positive impact. The year to year retention rate in the fall of 2006 was 65 percent; by the fall of 2008 it had jumped to 70 percent. The graduation rate now exceeds other community colleges in the CUNY system – results that are garnering attention and inquiries from institutions and policy leaders across the nation.

While the long-term impact of various efforts is yet to be told, intermediate findings suggest the college's strategies and supports are helping students progress, particularly students who are under-prepared academically when they arrive. Students in learning communities pass out of developmental courses more quickly, have higher GPAs

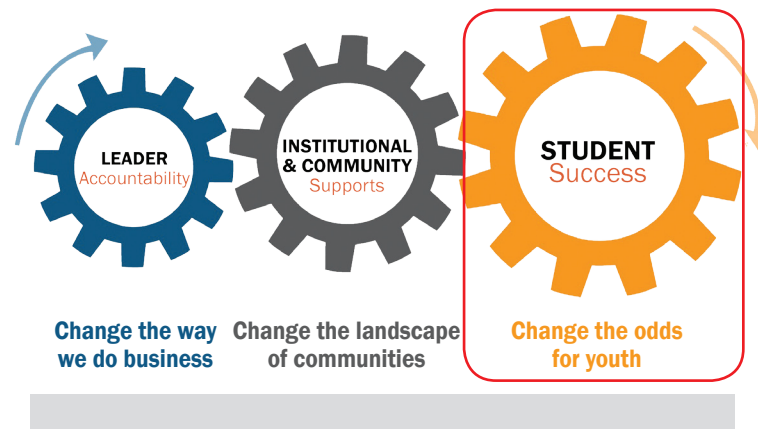
and accumulate credits toward a degree faster than non-participating counterparts. Two-thirds of the students who participated in President's Prep advanced one level or more in developmental courses, compared with 42 percent of students college-wide who require remediation.<sup>v</sup> Although focused on intervening with students who start behind or fall behind, Kingsborough is beginning to track progress for all students at all stages of their college careers.

This commitment to tracking and reporting on student progress is matched by an ongoing urgency to get the inputs right, to make teaching more student-centered, to increase collaboration between academic and student affairs, and to continue the cultural shifts toward evidence-based practice and data-driven decision making.

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President Peruggi summarized Kingsborough's commitment this way. "We continue to work to put the pieces of the community college jigsaw puzzle together. We are always looking for new and better ways to provide support, enhance curriculum, improve our teaching, adapt to new career paths. Students come to Kingsborough with hopes and dreams for a better life for themselves and their families. We believe that it's our job to give them something beyond what they've ever imagined."

### FOCUSED LEADERSHIP, INCREASED SUPPORT, STUDENT SUCCESS



## Endnotes

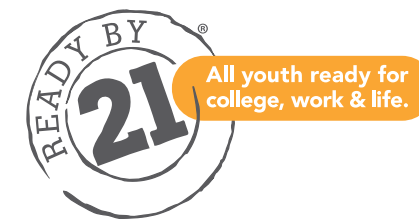
<sup>i</sup> Forum for Youth Investment. (2010). *Bring Precision to Your Passion: A Quick Overview of the Ready by 21 Approach to Data-Driven Decision Making*. Washington, DC.

<sup>ii</sup> ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Single Stop USA. (2011). What is Single Stop USA? [Web site.] Retrieved online at <http://singlestopusa.org/About-Us.shtml>.

<sup>iv</sup> Scrivener, S., Bloom, D. LeBlanc, A., Paxson, C., Rouse, C.E., and Sommo, C. (March 2008). *A Good Start: Two Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College*. MDRC: New York, NY.

<sup>v</sup> Kingsborough College (May, 2009). *President's Prep Program, Interim Report to the Tortora Sillcox Family Foundation*. Kingsborough Community College: New York, NY.



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