The Impact of the Strong Start Program on Student Outcomes in Developmental College Courses

Nichole Gibbs Thomas, PhD

Abstract
Using the four-Cs framework, the Strong Start Program was developed and implemented at a two-year public community college to increase developmental course pass rates. There was a statistically significant difference \( z = 1.93, p < .05 \) in the proportion of students who passed Strong Start supported courses (68.43%; \( n = 199 \)) and students who passed traditional developmental courses (59.46%, \( n = 231 \)).

Problem
To increase the performance of at-risk students completing developmental courses at community colleges, a variety of methods and support services have been utilized.

Despite employing these methods and support services, many community colleges continue to have low course pass rates for developmental college courses.

One targeted intervention is the Strong Start Program, which was created to increase the course pass rates of developmental courses by helping students to recognize, adopt, and engage in the behaviors needed to complete instructor-assigned course work outside of class.

What was not known is whether the Strong Start Program was positively impactful on the course pass rates of developmental college courses.

Purpose
The purpose of this research study was to determine whether the Strong Start program was an effective intervention for increasing course pass rates for developmental college courses.

Research Question
Is the Strong Start Program an effective intervention for increasing the course pass rate for developmental college courses?

Method
A matched-comparison quasi-experimental research design was used.

Sample
20 developmental courses were selected for inclusion in this study.

430 students enrolled in 20 courses comprised the entire sample for the study.

There were 10 Strong-Start supported courses (\( n = 199 \)),
- 4 courses were developmental writing courses,
- 3 were developmental math courses,
- 3 were developmental reading courses.

10 instructor-matched developmental courses (\( n = 231 \)) were selected for comparison,
- Each instructor-matched comparison course was the same course taught by the same professor in a prior semester, but without Strong Start support.

Procedures
Intervention. The intervention was administered in a single academic year across the Fall and Spring semesters by 3 Strong Start counselors.

Data Collection. The final grades for all students were retrieved from the student information system at the end of each semester.

Results
The proportion of students who passed Strong-Start Supported developmental courses (68.43%) was significantly greater \( z = 1.93, p < .05 \) than the proportion of students who passed instructor-matched traditional unsupported developmental courses (59.46%).
- The significant overall difference was largely accounted for by the difference in Strong-Start supported developmental math courses.

There was a significant positive difference \( z = 2.00, p < .05 \) in the proportion of students who passed strong-start supported developmental math courses (49.33%) and the proportion of students who passed instructor-matched comparison developmental-math courses (33.60%).

Limitations
Random assignment of students to the Strong-Start supported courses and instructor-matched comparison courses was not done.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution, because it’s possible that differences in course pass rates could be attributed to other factors.

Conclusions
The Strong Start Program is a program that warrants continuation and replication.

Social Change Implications
This study provides empirical evidence that supports what researchers (Capp, 2011) have suggested, which is that an inclusive approach involving faculty and other departments should be a part of the developmental mission of community colleges.