Committing to Student Engagement

Reflections on CCSSE's First Five Years

2007 Findings

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement *(CCSSE)* this year celebrates five years of helping community colleges better serve their students. With its unrelenting focus on using data to improve students' educational experiences, *CCSSE* has established itself as a leading voice in community college improvement efforts. More important, *CCSSE* has helped a growing number of college leaders change the way they think about their work. College faculty and administrators who once made decisions based on their personal perceptions now increasingly base decisions — about everything from allocating resources to selecting teaching strategies — on evidence.

And perhaps most significant, over the past half decade, *CCSSE* and its member colleges have learned a great deal about how to engage students so they will be more likely to attain their academic goals. This year, in honor of its fifth anniversary, *CCSSE* presents the results of its annual survey in terms of lessons learned and strategies that work.

What We've Learned About Student Engagement

There is no silver bullet that will help more community college students succeed. There is, however, a growing body of data and research that can help colleges improve their educational practices and chart a course that will lead to better results. *CCSSE* is proud of its contributions to this critical effort.

In its first five years, *CCCSE* has:

★ **Created the *CCSSE* survey and the *CCSSE* benchmarks,** which give participating colleges objective and relevant data about their students' experiences. With these data, the colleges can better understand how effectively they are engaging their students and identify areas for improvement.

★ **Grown significantly.** *CCSSE* has surveyed almost 700,000 students from 548 different colleges in 48 states, British Columbia, and the Marshall Islands. Colleges that have participated in *CCSSE* represent about half of the nation's public community colleges and 56% of the national community college credit student population.

★ **Provided colleges with training and online tools** that help them use their data.

★ **Created *CCFSSE,*** the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, which helps colleges focus on faculty members' professional roles and compare faculty members' and students' perceptions about the educational experience.

★ **Established *CCSSE*'s reliability and validity.** *CCSSE*'s validation research shows that the *CCSSE* survey instrument provides a valuable proxy for student success in community colleges.

★ **Initiated the three-year *CCSSE* cohort,** which further increases the stability of the overall results.

★ **Introduced special focus survey items** that each year delve into an issue important to the field. At the same time, the core *CCSSE* survey remains consistent to allow for year-to-year comparisons.

★ **Demonstrated a commitment to transparency and improvement** through public reporting, a no-holds-barred analysis of the data, and an unwavering focus on both challenges and solutions.

Five Lessons Learned

CCSSE's work has contributed to the body of research and practice that together help colleges better engage students, retain students, and increase the likelihood that students will succeed. Here *CCSSE* offers five lessons learned in its first five years of work.

Lesson #1: Be intentional. Engagement doesn't happen by accident; it happens by design. Community colleges serve high percentages of students who juggle school, work, and family care commitments, and who attend college part-time. Most students simply are not on campus enough for engagement to occur spontaneously. Consequently, most students typically do not get the benefit of spur-of-the-moment conversations about coursework or unplanned study sessions. They rarely bump into professors on campus and have serendipitous informal conversations. Community colleges, therefore, must be deliberate and aggressively create opportunities to involve students so that engagement becomes central to every student's experience.

Lesson #2: Engagement matters for all students, but it matters more for some than for others. Throughout higher education, there are consistent, unacceptable gaps between outcomes for high-risk students and outcomes for their peers. *CCSSE* data show that when there are differences in engagement between low- and high-risk students, the students typically described as high-risk — including academically underprepared students, students of color, first-generation students, and nontraditional learners — are *more engaged* in their college experience than their peers.

At the same time, many of these students have lower aspirations and less successful outcomes. In other words, they are working harder, but achieving lower results. Colleges, therefore, should disaggregate their data, compare results for different student groups, and maximize engagement opportunities for those who are most at risk.

Lesson #3: Part-time students and faculty are the reality of community colleges — and typically are not adequately addressed in improvement efforts. Close to two-thirds of community college students attend college part-time, and about two-thirds of community college faculty members teach part-time.*

There is ample evidence that attending college part-time puts students at greater risk of not attaining their educational goals. Community colleges can better address the needs of part-time students by building more engagement opportunities into the classroom experience and by making certain activities mandatory.

Colleges also are recognizing that they must change the way they approach the 67% of their faculty members who, on average, are employed part-time. Refocusing work with part-time faculty likely will have the greatest effect on part-time students; this is because part-time faculty are more likely than full-timers to teach at night and on weekends, when part-time students are more likely to take classes.

Lesson #4: Data are our friends. Since its inception, *CCSSE* has encouraged colleges to build a culture of evidence — a culture in which administrators, faculty, and staff consider data to be signposts that their college can use to set goals, monitor progress, and improve practice. All of these stakeholders regularly review data on student engagement, progress, and achievement, and they make decisions based on what these data show.

Individuals operating within a culture of evidence embrace data, sharing them honestly and unflinchingly, and use them to assess student and institutional performance and to identify means for improvement. These individuals know that transparency builds credibility, ownership, and support for change.

Lesson #5: Look behind the numbers. Colleges that are working within a culture of evidence know that looking at survey data answers some questions — and it raises others. *CCSSE* encourages colleges to go deeper to learn more. For example, student focus groups provide rich information about student observations, insights, likes, and dislikes.

CCSSE also looks behind the numbers on a national scale. Examples of this include the *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success* (a *CCSSE* project), which has added to the growing body of research that shows that developing relationships — with other students, faculty, and staff — is a significant contributor to students' success.

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*U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF: 04) Report on Faculty and Instructional Staff in Fall 2003,* May 2005.
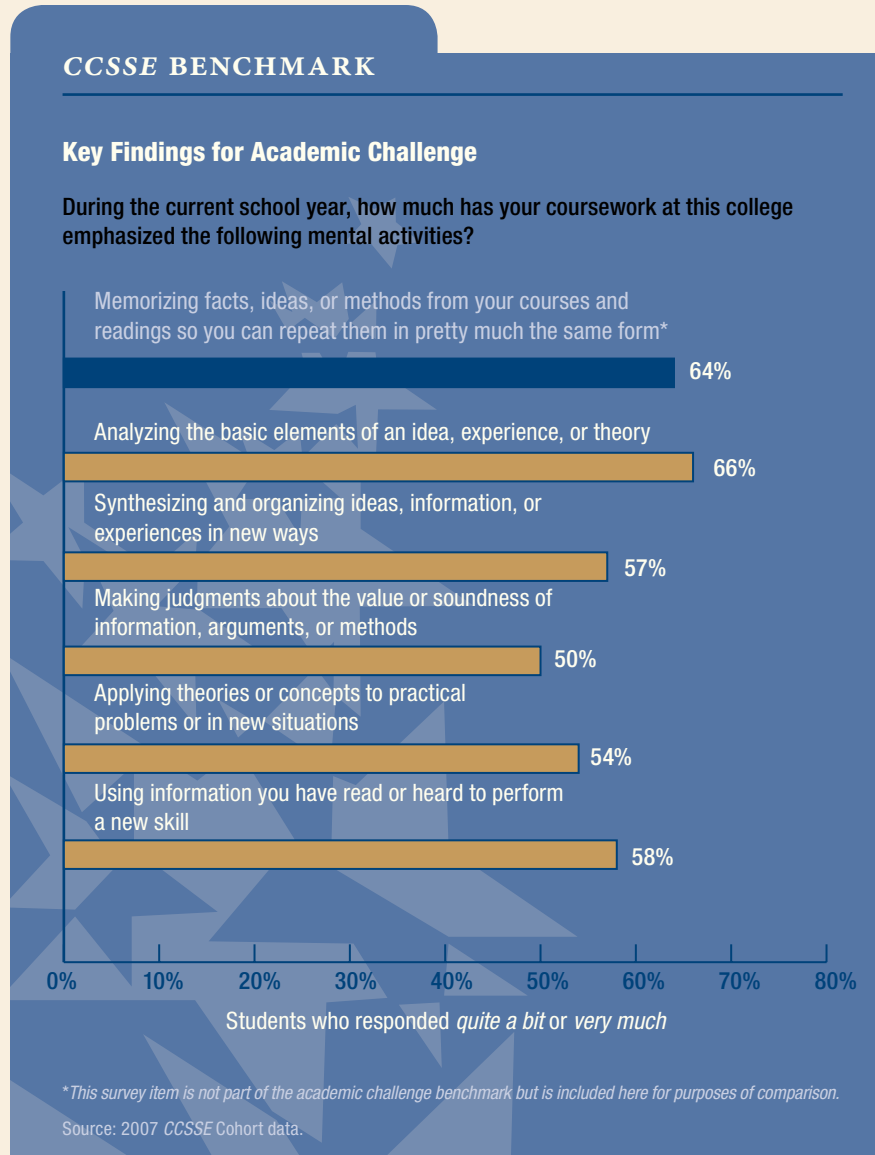
Five Strategies That Work

Every year, *CCSSE* results bring good news about how community colleges are using data to restructure students' educational experiences and maximize student engagement. But the data also reveal where individual colleges, and the field as a whole, have work to do.

Research and experience point to a number of strategies that can provide important returns in terms of strengthened student engagement and improved student outcomes. The following pages describe five strategies that are working for community colleges, along with relevant 2007 *CCSSE* and *CCFSSE* findings. Please note that survey items and *CCSSE* benchmarks are not tied to specific strategies. In fact, the best engagement strategies likely will have an impact on a range of survey items and benchmarks. (Visit www.ccsse.org to see descriptions of the benchmarks, specific survey items associated with each benchmark, and key findings organized by benchmark.)

Strategy #1: Set High Expectations and Clear Goals

Setting and communicating high expectations. Every college has a stated commitment to educating all students, but their actions tell us more than their mission statements. Even a casual visitor can walk onto a college campus and know, almost instantly, whether the college community *believes* that all students can learn. Do they look at their students in terms of attributes or deficits? Do they talk about difficult subjects or difficult students? The students' ability to learn or the students' right to fail? Institutions that expect students to perform well use language that communicates students' value and potential.

Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same form*
64%

Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory
66%

Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences in new ways
57%

Making judgments about the value or soundness of information, arguments, or methods
50%

Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
54%

Using information you have read or heard to perform a new skill
58%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%

Students who responded *quite a bit* or *very much*

*This survey item is not part of the academic challenge benchmark but is included here for purposes of comparison.

Source: 2007 *CCSSE* Cohort data.

This language helps set high expectations for students — and it is contagious. In high-expectation cultures, students who need developmental education start to believe, some of them for the first time, that they are capable of college-level work. Those who come to college seeking an associate degree start planning for the bachelor's degree they'll earn next. When colleges believe in their students and push them to do more, the students' aspirations rise.

Items that make up the **academic challenge** benchmark reflect a college's expectations of its students. For example, 57% of 2007 *CCSSE* Cohort respondents report that their college emphasizes synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences in new ways *quite a bit* or *very much,* and 50% say their college emphasizes making judgments about the value or soundness of information or arguments *quite a bit* or *very much.* These are recognized as examples of higher-order thinking, an indicator of greater academic challenge. By contrast, 64% of 2007 *CCSSE* Cohort respondents report that their college emphasizes the rote work of memorizing facts and ideas *quite a bit* or *very much.*

Setting goals and providing the support to meet them. Increasing expectations is only one step toward success. For too many students, the journey starts and ends with aspiration because they don't have a clear path toward their goals. Some students are surprised to learn that they must pass one or more developmental education classes before they can start college-level work. Others aren't sure which classes they should take to reach their goals. Colleges can help students turn their wishes into concrete plans by requiring them to create academic road maps and then giving them support that helps them stay on track.

Strategy #2: Focus on the Front Door

By all measures, attrition, particularly in the first semester, is a significant problem for community colleges and their students; community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the students' second college year.

Current research indicates that helping students succeed through the equivalent of the first semester (12–15 credit hours) can dramatically improve retention. Successfully completing the first semester, moreover, improves students' chances of attaining further milestones and, ultimately, earning certificates and degrees.

Colleges must address the precipitous loss of new students by focusing on the front door — designing engagement efforts that capture students from the moment of their first interactions with the college.

Undoubtedly, academic advising and planning are central to any strategy that focuses on entering students. Items associated with the **support for learners** benchmark show how often students use these and other services as well as how much they value those services.

Every year, *CCSSE* respondents place the highest value on academic advising, and consistently, there is a gap between the percentage of students who value advising and those who use it. In the 2007 *CCSSE* cohort, 89% of respondents say that academic advising and planning are *somewhat* or *very important;* 54% report using that service *sometimes* or *often,* and more than a third of students say they *rarely* or *never* use this service.

Students not only value advising, but also they place a premium on certain advisors. The 2006 *CCSSE* special focus questions

CCFSSE: Time Spent Advising Students

About how many hours do you spend in a typical seven-day week advising students?

Responses of full-time faculty

- 17 or more hours: 3%
- 9–16 hours: 7%
- 5–8 hours: 17%
- 0 hours: 12%
- 1–4 hours: 61%

Responses of part-time faculty

- 9–16 hours: 2%
- 17 or more hours: 1%
- 5–8 hours: 5%
- 0 hours: 39%
- 1–4 hours: 52%

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: 2007 *CCFSSE* Cohort data.

revealed that students identify faculty members as their best source of academic guidance. Yet 2007 *CCFSSE* results show that 23% of faculty typically spend zero hours per week advising students.

Disaggregating the data uncovers an even greater gap between students' reported needs for advising and faculty members' reported advising activities. Nearly four in 10 part-time faculty members (39%) report spending zero hours in a typical week advising students. About two-thirds of community college faculty members teach part-time. These faculty members, moreover, typically teach half to two-thirds of all course sections. If a significant portion of part-time faculty members are not advising students, then a large percentage of students may have little opportunity to receive guidance from faculty members.

In addition to advising, engagement efforts that focus on entering students, such as orientation and student success courses, typically help students make connections to other students, faculty, and staff. Ideally, these experiences also build academic skills and connect students to academic tools and support services, helping them find the resources they will need to succeed at the college.

Strategy #3: Elevate Developmental Education

It is estimated that up to 61% of all first-time community college students are assessed as underprepared for the academic demands of college-level courses, and the numbers are far higher in some settings.* Community colleges cannot significantly strengthen student success unless they first focus on providing effective developmental education and appropriate levels of student support.

*Adelman, C. January 2004. *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972–2000.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
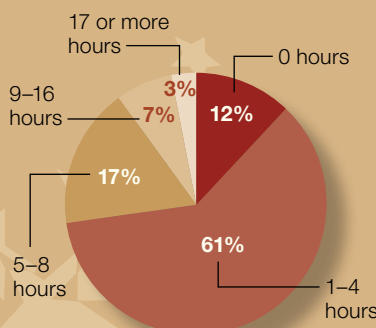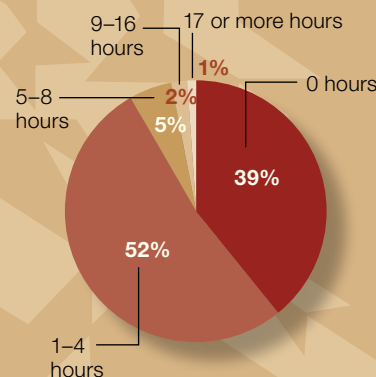
Research shows that effective remediation pays high dividends, but success may depend on early intervention. Thus, colleges that want to better serve academically underprepared students may choose to focus more attention and resources on supporting these students in their first semester of work. This support should begin with accurate and effective placement information. It also should include making sure that there are enough developmental course sections — and that all are taught by qualified faculty who want to teach them.

Finally, colleges should pay attention to the academically underprepared students who are working hard but not getting solid results. Items in the **student effort** benchmark consistently show the effort underprepared students put into their work. For example, 59% of academically underprepared students *often* or *very often* prepare two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in versus 42% of academically prepared students.

Strategy #4: Use Engaging Instructional Approaches

Most community college students are attending college part-time, working and commuting. Many also are caring for dependents. Given these competing priorities, most students spend little time on campus beyond the time they attend classes. Indeed, *CCSSE* data indicate that overall, the most successful engagement strategies are likely to happen in classrooms.

The value of capitalizing on the time students spend in class is illustrated by items from the **active and collaborative learning** benchmark. These data consistently show that students are more engaged in the classroom than anywhere else. For example, whereas 21% of students *often* or *very often* work with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments, more than double that number, 45%, *often* or *very often* work with other students on projects during class.

CCSSE research shows that active and collaborative learning is broadly related to a range of student outcomes, including persistence and academic achievement. Colleges and their faculty can play to the strength of in-class engagement and maximize use of instructional approaches that engage students.

CCFSSE data, particularly those concerning how faculty members use class time, also provide useful insights. Almost a third of faculty respondents (31%) report that they spend more than half of their class time lecturing. More than one-fifth of respondents (21%) spend zero hours on small group activities; nearly three quarters of respondents (74%) spend less than 20% of class time on such activities. Colleges can use these data to encourage faculty members to use more engaging instructional strategies and to identify areas of focus for professional development.

Strategy # 5: Make Engagement Inescapable

Colleges are most likely to engage students when they make engagement inescapable.

For example, survey items from the **student-faculty interaction** benchmark show that students and faculty members are most likely to interact when they already are in the same place — the classroom. Strikingly, only 15% of students say they discussed ideas from classes with instructors outside the classroom *often* or *very often,* and nearly half (47%) say they *never* had such conversations.

But colleges and their faculty members can set the tone for — and set the terms of — student engagement. With regard to student-faculty interaction, for example, colleges can require students to see faculty members in their offices at least once before mid-semester or develop strategies for faculty to build career planning into the classroom experience.

Faculty members who are thinking intentionally about course design also can make other types of engagement inescapable. They can require students to work on projects with other students outside of class, require a service learning project, make the end-of-course assessment a group project, and so on.

CCSSE BENCHMARK

**Student-Faculty Interaction Happens Primarily in the Classroom**

In your experience at this college during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?

Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor

Never — 10%
Very often 14%
Often 31%
Sometimes 45%
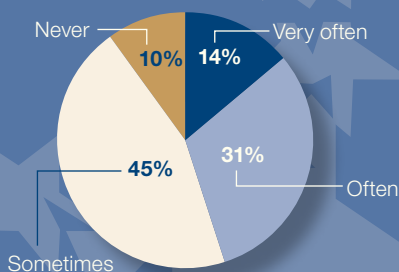
Source: 2007 *CCSSE* Cohort data.

Discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside the classroom

Very often 4%
Often 11%
Never 47%
Sometimes 37%
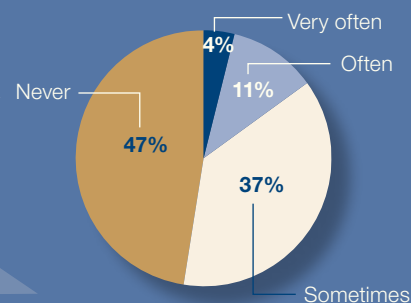
Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Special Focus: Entering Student Engagement

The *CCSSE* survey includes five *special focus* items that examine an area of student experience and institutional performance that is critical for student success. The special focus items address a different topic each year.

The 2007 special focus items highlight entering student engagement, an area of growing interest to *CCSSE* and to many community colleges.

The *CCSSE* survey is administered in the spring term, by which time most students will have had some substantial experience with their institutions — experience that is important for responding to the *CCSSE* survey. But longitudinal data show that community colleges lose many students before a second term of enrollment. Thus, by the spring term, the students who still are in college, particularly those from higher-risk groups, might already be considered college "survivors."

Thus, *CCSSE* is introducing a sharper focus on the front door of the college. This work begins with the 2007 special focus survey items, which elicit information from students about their experiences in the first four weeks of college. These survey items address advising, instructional techniques, orientation, and other practices associated with improved student success.

CCSSE's focus on the front door will continue with its new Survey of Entering Student Engagement *(SENSE)*. Results from the *SENSE* pilot administration will be described in the first-look report for *SENSE — Starting Right: A First Look at Engaging Entering Students —* to be published in spring 2008.

Taken together, *CCSSE* and *SENSE* will offer complementary pieces of the student success puzzle, with *CCSSE* providing a comprehensive look at the overall quality of all students' educational experiences and *SENSE* offering a focused snapshot of new students and their earliest college experiences.

Entering Students: Get Them While You Can

The special focus survey items show that fewer than half of students (43%) met with an advisor to discuss educational goals in the first four weeks of college, and more than a third of students (36%) did not complete an assessment test for course placement by the end of their first four weeks of college.

Nearly one-third of entering students (32%) did not attend an orientation course. Among students who attended an orientation course, slightly more than a third (36%) say they were *very satisfied* with their experience.

In classrooms, 62% of respondents report that instructors used techniques that encouraged them to be actively involved *often* or *very often* during their first four weeks of college. Overall, 35% of students report that they are *very satisfied* with their colleges' processes for working with new students.

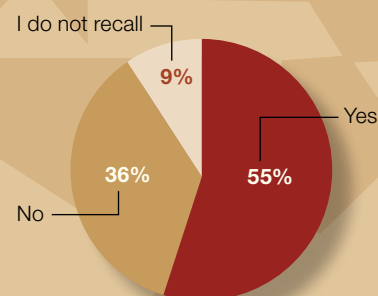## Key Findings: Entering Student Experiences

Advising

By the end of my FIRST FOUR WEEKS at this college, I had met with an advisor to discuss my educational goals.

No, I have discussed educational goals with an advisor, but it did not happen during my first four weeks at this college — 13%
I do not recall — 9%
Yes — 43%
No, I met with an advisor by the end of my first four weeks at this college, but we did not discuss my educational goals — 7%
No, I did not meet with an advisor by the end of my first four weeks at this college — 28%
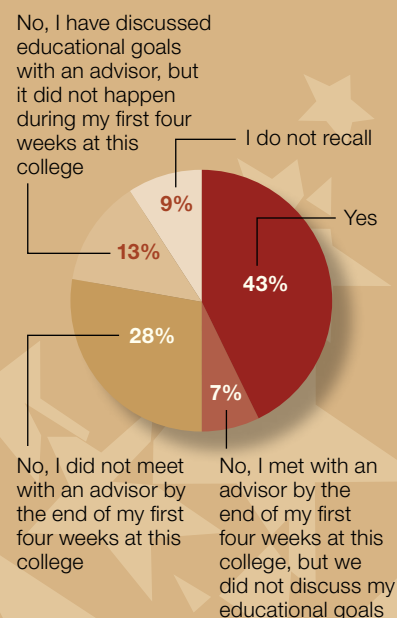
Assessment tests

By the end of my FIRST FOUR WEEKS I had completed an initial assessment test to determine which reading, writing, and math courses I should enroll in.

I do not recall — 9%
Yes — 55%
No — 36%

Source: 2007 *CCSSE* data.