A Growing Demand for Higher Education, A Growing Need for Quality

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement *(CCSSE)* provides a resource for assessing quality in community college education — and a tool that helps colleges improve their performance. The need for such a tool is acute. Community colleges across the United States, committed to providing access to quality education, are challenged by both escalating enrollments and severely reduced resources.

Community colleges have the complicated task of providing broad access to ensure that *everyone* has an entry point to quality higher education — and then designing effective educational experiences for a highly diverse population of students with varying goals and competing demands on their time.

In trying to meet increased demand with reduced resources — without compromising on quality — community colleges need tools that can help them better assess their students' needs and strengthen institutional efforts to promote retention and learning. As community colleges endeavor to provide access *and* quality, *CCSSE* is a tool that can help them succeed.

A Focus on Student Engagement

This year, *CCSSE* introduces its national benchmarks for effective educational practice in community colleges. The introduction of these benchmarks creates unprecedented opportunities for community colleges, their students, their communities, and policymakers, all of whom have a stake in quality higher education.

Research shows that the more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter — the more likely they are to learn and to achieve their academic goals.

CCSSE benchmarks focus on institutional practices and student behaviors that promote student engagement — and that correlate highly with student learning and persistence. They are one useful way to view results of *CCSSE*'s survey, *The Community College Student Report,* which is administered directly to students during classes at participating colleges.

CCSSE provides the colleges with survey results, along with tools they can use to improve programs and services for students. *CCSSE* also makes its results public. The organization's Web site, www.ccsse.org, provides detailed survey results as well as information about student engagement and community colleges.

Benchmarks of Quality

The five benchmarks of effective educational practice in community colleges are **active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction,** and **support for learners.** These benchmarks are tools that colleges can use to:

★ convert data into useful information;

★ compare their performance to that of similar institutions, to the aspirations of their own faculty and staff, and to the full *CCSSE* population of community colleges;

★ compare their own performance across benchmarks;

★ identify areas in need of improvement and monitor the effects of improvement initiatives; and

★ track their progress toward identified institutional goals.

Because the results are public, benchmarks also can stimulate conversation — within colleges and among policymakers — about effective educational practice.

The National Picture: Key Issues and Challenges

Just as no single number can adequately — or accurately — describe a single college's performance, no single view of overall results can describe the performance of community colleges across the country. Several interesting patterns emerge in a review of the national picture — some that confirm long-held beliefs, some that reveal unexpected information.

★ **Capture Time Is Critical.** "Capture time" — the time colleges have to engage students — is limited because students have multiple demands on their time and spend limited time on campus. *CCSSE* 2003 data show that overall, students' engagement in out-of-class activities is low. Because vital capture time is in short supply, community colleges might gain significant ground in retention and student learning by expanding the design and use of *intentionally engaging* classroom activities, course require-ments and assignments, and assessments.

★ **Student Persistence Remains a Challenge.** Nearly one in 10 students (9%) are "uncertain" whether they will return to the college the following year. An additional 5% have no current plans to return to the college (a response that is different from saying that they will accomplish their goals and not return for that reason). When viewed in the context of institutional and public priorities placed on promoting student persistence, these are disturbing findings, but many community colleges already are taking steps to address them.

★ **Student Aspirations: Charting a Path Is Essential for Success.** Given both research and experience indicating that goal-setting can be particularly important to at-risk students, several *CCSSE* findings add impetus to calls for advising strategies that are designed to be engaging.

★ **Promising Results for Students of Color.** Taken as a group, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students are more engaged than their fellow students who are white. Though the differences are fairly small, they are consistent, and they suggest that students of color are exerting relatively more effort while experiencing greater academic challenge.

CCSSE
Community College Survey
of Student Engagement

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Engaging Community Colleges

National Benchmarks of Quality

Summary of 2003 Findings

CCSSE's 2003 Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Key findings for the 2003 *CCSSE* benchmarks are described briefly below. Visit www.ccsse.org for detailed survey findings including user-customized searches, a complete list of the survey items related to each benchmark, and examples of promising educational practices at *CCSSE* member colleges.
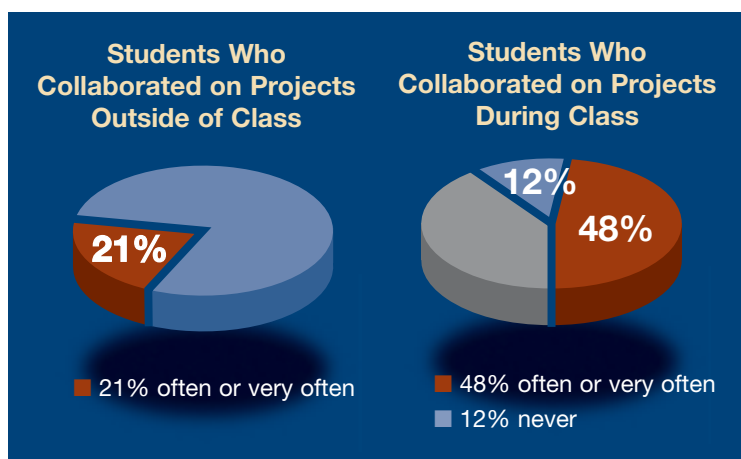
Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are actively involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Among the survey items associated with this benchmark, students are asked whether they participate in class discussions and whether they work with other students on projects in and outside the classroom.

Key Findings:
Active and Collaborative Learning

★ 64% of respondents report that they asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions either often or very often. This leaves 36% who have engaged in these activities less frequently or not at all.

★ Only 27% have often or very often made a class pre-sentation. Nearly a third (31%) have never done so.

★ Close to half (48%) often or very often worked with other students on projects during class, while 12% report never having that experience.

★ Only 21% worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments.

★ Just 20% have at least occasionally participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course.

Students Who Collaborated on Projects Outside of Class

21%

■ 21% often or very often

Students Who Collaborated on Projects During Class

12%

48%

■ 48% often or very often
■ 12% never

CCSSE Opposes Ranking

CCSSE opposes using its data to rank colleges. There is no single number that can adequately — or accurately — describe a college's performance; most colleges will perform relatively well on some benchmarks and need improvement on others. Each community college's performance should be considered in terms of its mission, institutional focus, and student characteristics. Because of differences in these areas — and variations in college resources — comparing survey results between individual institutions serves little constructive purpose and likely will be misleading. Moreover, *improvement over time* may provide the best gauge of a college's efforts to enhance student learning and persistence.

Student Effort

Students' behaviors contribute significantly to their learning and the likelihood that they will attain their educational goals. Among the survey items associated with this benchmark, students are asked whether they come to class without completing readings or assignments, whether they prepare multiple drafts of assignments before turning them in, and how frequently they use skill labs and other student services.

Key Findings: Student Effort

★ More than half (51%) of respondents indicate that they often or very often prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in, though almost a fifth (19%) report that they never did so.

★ 60% of respondents report that they often or very often worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources, while 11% never did so.

Students Who Prepared Multiple Drafts of Assignments

19%

51%

- 51% often or very often
- 19% never
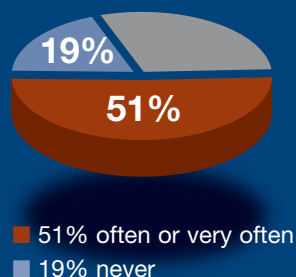
Students Who Wrote Papers Integrating Ideas from Various Sources

11%

60%

- 60% often or very often
- 11% never
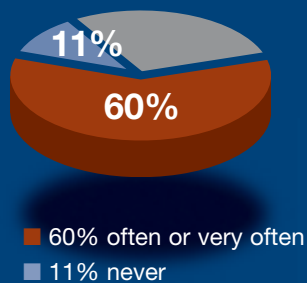
★ 67% of *full-time* students spend 10 or fewer hours preparing for class. Seventy-three percent of all respondents indicate that they come to class unprepared at least some of the time, and 27% indicate that they never do so.

Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Among the survey items associated with this benchmark, students are asked how many books they have read, how many papers they have written, and whether they have worked harder than they thought they could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations.

Key Findings: Academic Challenge

★ 49% of students indicate that they often or very often worked harder than they thought they could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations.

★ 31% of *full-time* students report that they have read four or fewer assigned textbooks, manuals, books, or book-length packs of course readings during the current school year. (The survey is administered in February–April.)

★ 30% of *full-time* students report that they have written four or fewer papers or reports of any length during the current school year.

★ 67% indicate that their exams are relatively to extremely challenging, while 10% find them relatively to extremely easy.

★ Surveyed students report that their coursework emphasizes "very much" or "quite a bit" using information to perform a new skill (61%) and analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory (65%); but smaller percentages of students report an emphasis on the mental activities of synthesis (57%), application (55%), and judgment (50%).

Are Students Reading Enough?

31%
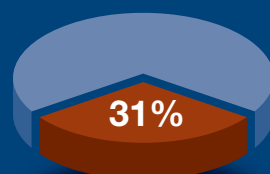
- 31% of *full-time* students read four or fewer assigned textbooks, manuals, or books during the current school year

Are Students Writing Enough?

30%
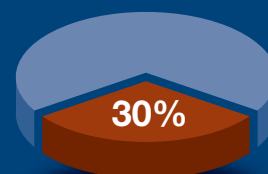
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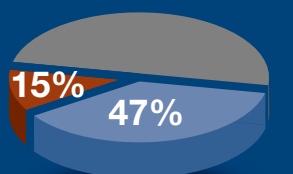
Student-Faculty Interaction

In general, the more interaction students have with their teachers, the more likely they are to learn effectively and persist toward achievement of their educational goals. Among the survey items associated with this benchmark, students are asked whether they discussed grades or assignments with an instructor, talked about career plans with an instructor or advisor, or worked with instructors on activities other than coursework.

Key Findings: Student-Faculty Interaction

★ A third of students (33%) say they have never used e-mail to communicate with an instructor. Close to one-third (31%), however, have used e-mail for that purpose either often or very often.

★ 45% report that they have discussed grades or assignments with an instructor either often or very often, leaving over half who have done so occasionally or never.
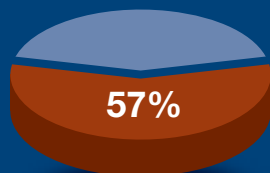
Students' Views of Academic and Support Services

	Most Important	Most Frequently Used	Most Satisfied With	Most Dissatisfied With
1	Academic advising/planning	Computer labs	Computer labs	Career counseling
2	Computer labs	Financial aid advising	Academic advising/planning	Job placement assistance
3	Financial aid advising	Academic advising/planning	Financial aid advising	Financial aid advising
4	Career counseling	Skill labs	Skill labs	Transfer credit assistance

★ While 25% of students have often or very often talked with an advisor or instructor about career plans, 31% say they have never done so.

★ Only 15% of students report having often or very often discussed ideas from their readings or classes with instructors outside of class, and 47% have *never* engaged with faculty in that way.

★ 57% state that they often or very often received prompt feedback from instructors on their performance, which is known as an important factor in student learning and retention.

Key Findings: Support for Learners

★ While students attribute relatively high importance to academic advising and career counseling, one-third to one-half of students rarely or never take advantage of those services.

★ While 70% of students indicate that their college provides the support they need to succeed at the college either "quite a bit" or "very much," a smaller percentage — 42% — report that the college provides the financial support they need to afford their education.

Students Who Discussed Ideas with Instructors Outside of Class

- 15% often or very often
- 47% never

Students Who Received Prompt Feedback from Instructors

- 57% often or very often

Support for Learners

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relationships among different groups on campus. Among the survey items associated with this benchmark, students are asked whether their college helps them cope with nonacademic responsibilities (work, family, etc.), whether their college provides the financial support they need to afford their education, and how frequently they use services such as academic advising and career counseling.

Understanding and Using Benchmarks

The purpose of "benchmarking" is to compare performance of like institutions — and through that process, to identify opportunities for improvement and potential models of "best practice." But *CCSSE* and its member colleges must not shy away from the question of whether the performance reflected in the survey results is *good enough,* either for individual institutions or for community colleges nationally.

Thus, *CCSSE* presents information in two ways: (1) each benchmark, described with a standardized mean of 50, provides an overview of a particular performance area, a way to compare performance on various benchmarks within an institution, and a way to compare performance among groups of similar institutions; and (2) results for individual survey items, presented in absolute terms, are the place to see exactly what is happening and to ask the difficult question, *how good is good enough?*