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Research Update

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement

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The Community College Survey of Student Engagement, established in 2001 and administered by the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, provides systematically collected data on the experiences of community college students. This article describes what has been learned through the survey to date and notes plans for the future, including the development of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) for community colleges.

Keywords: *community college research; Community College Survey of Student Engagement; student engagement; student success*

Student engagement recently has become an increasingly prominent part of the vocabulary of community college discussions about effective educational practice and student success. That development, to a significant extent, is attributable to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which was established in 2001 as part of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin. With initial funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lumina Foundation for Education, the survey also has been cosponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning. Subsequent grants from the Houston Endowment, Inc., and the MetLife Foundation have augmented CCSSE's capacity to serve the community college field.

CCSSE is a sister of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), developed for 4-year colleges and universities, and CCSSE staff members continue to enjoy an effective partnership and collaboration with NSSE colleagues at Indiana University. Strategic and policy guidance is provided by a National Advisory Board composed of community college

leaders, higher education researchers, foundation partners, and other key representatives. Technical guidance in survey development, data analysis, and reporting of results has been provided by a Technical Advisory Panel composed of experts in higher education and survey research.

Nature and Purpose of CCSSE

CCSSE's central mission is to provide information about effective educational practice in community colleges and assist institutions and policy-makers in using that information to promote improvements in student learning and retention. The NSSE (the survey for 4-year institutions) was founded, in part, as a response to the kinds of criteria used in the proliferating college ranking systems (e.g., as exemplified by the annual rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*). Similarly, CCSSE seeks to alter the discourse, on campus and beyond, about what constitutes quality in community college education. The conviction underlying and prompting this work is that quality judgments should be based not on reputation and resources but on systematically collected data about the educational experiences that students encounter at their colleges.

The CCSSE survey instrument was designed to obtain, on an annual basis, information about community college student participation in educationally purposeful activities. The results provide an estimate of how students spend their time; in what ways and how often they interact with faculty members, other professionals, and other students; and what they gain from attending college. Items on the CCSSE instrument are based on empirically confirmed good practices in undergraduate education. That is, they reflect institutional practices and student behaviors that are associated with higher levels of student learning and persistence in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The theoretical underpinnings of the survey are found in the extensive work of Pace (e.g., 1984) on student effort and measuring the quality of college students' experience; Astin's (1984) work on student involvement; the principles of good practice in undergraduate education developed by Chickering and Gamson (1987); and Kuh's further development of the concepts of student engagement (Kuh, 2001a, 2001b; Kuh, Pace, & Vesper, 1997).

CCSSE affirms a further organizational purpose related to accountability. From the beginning, CCSSE has been committed to public reporting of

survey results. Public reporting is accomplished via the CCSSE website (<http://www.ccsse.org>), which also supports benchmarking of effective educational practice through the use of interactive data search and custom reporting capabilities. This benchmarking capacity, unprecedented in the community college field, provides a significant tool for identifying strengths and weaknesses, monitoring progress, and improving performance.

Results from CCSSE are reported in terms of five benchmarks of effective educational practice, which are clusters of items that assess (a) the frequency of students' engagement in *Active and Collaborative Learning*; (b) the level of *Student Effort* applied to educational pursuits; (c) the degree of *Academic Challenge* students experience at their colleges; (d) the amount of Student-Faculty Interaction that occurs in class, out of class, or online; and (e) the *Support for Learners* provided through institutional practice and students' use of certain college services. The survey is administered in class to students in randomly selected credit course sections during the spring term at participating colleges.

Track Record to Date

Through the spring of 2007, which marked the fifth national survey administration, CCSSE's survey respondents—approaching 600,000—cumulatively represent a total credit enrollment of more than 3.4 million students across 548 different community colleges from 48 states, British Columbia, and the Marshall Islands. CCSSE's college membership during the same period represents approximately 49% of U.S. community colleges and 54% of their approximately 6.3 million credit students.

Eighteen states and statewide systems have committed to using CCSSE on a statewide basis. A growing number of state-based, district-based, and interest-group consortia of colleges also participate in the survey. Furthermore, CCSSE has been a partner in several national projects focused on the improvement of student outcomes in community colleges, including Vincent Tinto's Pathways project, the MDRC's Opening Doors project, and the Irvine Foundation's Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) project. These projects have employed CCSSE as part of their work, both in assessing the current status of educational practice at participating colleges and in monitoring the impact of selected improvement strategies. Nearly all colleges

involved in *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* have participated in the survey.

The survey has operated on a financially self-sufficient basis since September 2004. The work is accomplished by a staff of 16 individuals employed by the University of Texas at Austin.

Validation

With support from the Lumina Foundation, CCSSE recently completed a major validation research study (McClenney & Marti, 2006) examining the relationship of responses on the survey instrument to external data sets containing measures of student outcomes. Three separate sets of outcome data were used: (a) data from 2-year Hispanic-serving institutions and from member institutions of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities; (b) data from the Florida Department of Education for students at all 28 Florida community colleges; and (c) data from the “round one” *Achieving the Dream* colleges in five states. Results indicate that across the three data sets there is substantial empirical support (significant net and bivariate effects) for the link between CCSSE measures and external outcomes such as persistence, course completion, credit hour accumulation, grade-point average, and certificate or degree attainment. (For information on the psychometric properties of the survey, see Marti, n.d.)

The Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement

The spring of 2007 marks the third national administration of the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), an online survey of faculty members from colleges that also participate in the student survey. To date, 223 colleges have participated in the faculty survey, which elicits information about faculty demographics, classroom practices, use of professional time, and perceptions of student engagement. In response to demand from the field, and with the assistance of an advisory committee representing CCSSE colleges, CCSSE also has developed an end-of-course student feedback form and a classroom observation form. These tools, aligned with the core student survey,

are available free of charge from the CCSSE website and are intended for local administration.

Major Findings

Reports from CCSSE have highlighted a number of key findings that have been reinforced as the scope of the survey expands and the databases grow. Examples of these findings are described below.

Engagement Matters

Of great significance to community college educators and the higher education research community are findings from the validation study (McClenney & Marti, 2006) mentioned above. This study confirms several decades of research on effective practice in undergraduate student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) but extends that research for the first time to large-scale samples of community college students. As noted in the executive summary of the research findings, results validate CCSSE's use of student engagement as a proxy for student academic achievement and persistence. CCSSE benchmarks consistently exhibited a positive relationship with outcome measures. (For example, Active and Collaborative Learning, the most consistent predictor of student success across the three validation studies and across outcome measures, was linked with higher grades, higher course completion rates, number of terms enrolled, credit hours completed, long-term persistence, and degree completion. Similarly, results indicated that the Student-Faculty Interaction benchmark is related to academic and persistence outcomes.) In addition, CCSSE's five benchmarks of effective educational practice were predictably related to outcome measures. For example, whereas the Academic Challenge benchmark exhibited the strongest effects on academic outcomes, Support for Learners exhibited the strongest effects on persistence measures (McClenney & Marti, 2006, p. 6).

The Effort-Outcome Gap

CCSSE analyses have consistently revealed an effort-outcome gap (or compensatory effect) in results from certain subgroups of students, including African Americans, Hispanics, first-generation students, and

academically underprepared students. Essentially, the findings indicate that when these relatively high-risk students survive to the middle of the spring semester (when the survey is administered), they are likely to be more engaged than their comparison groups (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005). Yet, as is well-known, these groups tend also to have lower success rates than their comparison groups. The important implication here is that it is the highly engaged high-risk students who appear to be most likely to persist in college. Although engagement matters for all students, it appears to matter even more for students in the higher risk groups (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2007).

Disparities Between the Experiences of Full-Time and Part-Time Students

Almost two thirds of community college students nationally enroll on a part-time basis. CCSSE results show that these students have an educational experience that is qualitatively different from that of their full-time classmates. For example, part-time students are significantly less likely to work with other students on projects either in or outside of class; interact with instructors via e-mail or have conversations about grades, assignments, or career plans; or make a class presentation (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005, p. 12). Although these data may in part be unsurprising, colleges should contemplate why even the in-classroom experience of part-timers appears to be systematically less engaging. Given the large numbers of these students, attention to strategies for engaging them more effectively may provide an overall boost to the rates of successful student outcomes.

Students and the Faculty: Diverging Perceptions of the Same Reality

The CCFSSSE provides important new information about the community college faculty. As reported in CCSSE's national reports (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005, 2006), faculty members typically perceive higher levels of student engagement than students report. For example, whereas 93% of faculty members report that they often or very often provide prompt feedback on academic performance, only 55% of students report receiving such feedback often or very often (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005, p. 21). Although care must be exercised in interpreting comparisons of data

across these two surveys, the divergent perceptions prompt useful campus conversations, and the faculty survey provides a powerful affirmation of the value of examining systematic data regarding student experiences.

The Necessity of Engagement by Design

Community college students typically are a multitasking group, juggling their studies with work and family. Often, they also bring an array of family, academic, or other challenges with them to college. Consistent with these realities, a strong and recurrent theme in findings from the CCSSE survey is that community college students are far more likely to be engaged in their learning within the classroom than outside of the classroom. For example, more than twice as many students work with classmates on projects during class than they do outside of the classroom, and 84% indicate that they do not participate in college-sponsored extracurricular activities (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004, p. 9). Given the evidence that engagement is important for student success, the message for community college educators is that this engagement will not happen by accident. Engagement must be fostered through the intentional design of syllabi, in- and out-of-class assignments, assessments, and other educational experiences.

Engagement Early and Often

CCSSE's analyses (Marti, 2007) document the reality that community colleges lose large numbers of students during their first term and first year of college. CCSSE's premise is that colleges can address this issue by focusing institutional attention and resources on the task of engaging students effectively from their first moments on campus through their first few weeks and months as college students (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004). That conviction has led to the current development of a new resource for community colleges.

New From CCSSE: The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE)

CCSSE's newest initiative is the development of the SENSE for community colleges. The purpose of the survey, which will be piloted at

21 community colleges in the fall of 2007, is to collect, analyze, and report information about institutional practices and student behaviors in the first few weeks of college. The information will be useful to colleges in their efforts to deepen understanding of the student experience and improve practices in ways that will increase student success in the first year of college, thereby improving course completion rates and strengthening student persistence. After evaluation of the pilot test, up to 50 colleges will participate in the field test during the fall of 2008, and the survey will be opened to national administration in the fall of 2009.

Learning Events and Resources for Community Colleges

CCSSE and its companion surveys are intended not just as surveys but as an improvement strategy. To fulfill that purpose, survey staff members continually develop, often in collaboration with participating community colleges, tools, resources, and learning events that help college administrators, faculty members, and staff members understand their survey results, deepen their comprehension of students' experiences, and use the data to target improvement strategies and monitor the impact of those efforts. A major initiative in this arena will be the establishment in 2008 of a 2- to 3-day Entering Student Success Institute for teams from the colleges that participate in the entering student survey. A series of CCSSE Institutes is in the offing, as is the development of a survey tailored to assess online student engagement.

Summary

Findings from the CCSSE are providing a new understanding of the quality of students' experiences in community colleges, of the kinds of experiences that appear to be particularly important to certain groups of students, and of the ways in which individual colleges might target efforts to improve programs and services for students. Validation research undertaken by CCSSE documents significant relationships between student engagement and an array of desirable outcomes in college. And very important for the higher education research field, this work for the first time extends the body of research on effective practice in undergraduate

education beyond 4-year colleges and universities to large groups of community college students.

All of the initiatives described—and anticipated—add up to a continuing commitment to support community colleges in their efforts to ensure the highest possible level of quality in their work with an increasingly diverse student population while contributing to the development of new knowledge of value to the research community.

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