

Overview

A Sharpened Focus on Learning

Community colleges have long distinguished themselves through their efforts to put students first and their emphasis on teaching and learning. Innovations in curriculum, teaching strategies, and support services for students are hallmarks of these institutions. Yet while community colleges often pioneer new strategies, they don't have sufficient access to tools that help them assess their initiatives and measure their progress toward key goals.

Today, community colleges are being asked to rise to new challenges. Across the country, community colleges must respond to the increasing expectations for quality, performance, and accountability set by governing boards, state and federal governments, accrediting organizations, and the public. Key among those expectations is that colleges should emphasize assessment and improvement of student retention and student learning.

To respond effectively to these challenges, community and technical colleges need assessment tools appropriate to their unique missions and the characteristics of their diverse student populations. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*) is meeting that need.

The Community College Student Report

CCSSE's survey instrument, *The Community College Student Report*, provides information on student engagement, a key indicator of learning and, therefore, of the quality of community colleges. The survey, administered to community college students, asks questions that assess institutional practices and student behaviors that are correlated highly with student learning and student retention. *The Community College Student Report* is a versatile, research-based tool appropriate for multiple uses. It is a

- benchmarking instrument — establishing national norms on educational practice and performance by community and technical colleges.
- diagnostic tool — identifying areas in which a college can enhance students' educational experiences.
- monitoring device — documenting and improving institutional effectiveness over time.

Why Focus on Student Engagement?

The research findings are unequivocal. Student learning and student retention are correlated strongly with student engagement. The more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter being learned — the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels. This connection has been emphasized in a number of major studies and reports on the undergraduate experience. For example:

- *Involvement in Learning*, a 1984 report sponsored by the National Institute of Education, clearly states “two fundamental principles about the conditions of educational excellence everywhere.” Those principles are:
 1. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
 2. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement in learning (p.19).
- In “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (1987), Chickering and Gamson provide this oft-quoted guidance:

Good practice in undergraduate education:

1. Encourages student-faculty contact.
 2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
 3. Encourages active learning.
 4. Gives prompt feedback.
 5. Emphasizes time on task.
 6. Communicates high expectations.
 7. Respects diverse talents and ways of knowing.
- In *How College Affects Students* (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini affirm from their examination of 20 years of research that “students who are actively involved in both academic and out-of-class activities gain more from the college experience than those who are not so involved.”
 - In *Leaving College* (1993), Tinto summarizes recent evidence by saying:

Simply put, the same forces of contact and involvement that influence persistence also appear to shape student learning. Though the research is far from complete, it is apparent that the more students are involved in the social and intellectual life of a college, the more frequently they make contact with faculty and other students about learning issues, especially outside the class, the more students are likely to learn (p. 69).

The CCSSE Connection

It is this connection of student engagement to both learning and retention that provides the conceptual and empirical base for the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#) (NSSE). Both survey instruments are “specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (Kuh, 2001, p. 2).

CCSSE’s survey instrument, *The Community College Student Report*, includes items calling for students to report the frequency with which they engage in a number of activities representing good educational practice (e.g., participating in classroom discussions, interacting with faculty in and out of class, etc.). Respondents also indicate whether they have participated in or plan to take advantage of a variety of learning opportunities, including college orientation programs, internships or clinical placements, developmental education, and organized learning communities, for example. Students then are asked to report the number of hours spent each week on activities that include preparation for class, participation in extracurricular activities, work, parenting, and so on.

Other items assess the frequency with which students use the academic and student support services provided by the college, as well as their ratings of the importance of such services and their satisfaction with services received. Respondents also indicate through responses to several items the level of academic challenge they experience at their college — for example, the amount of reading and writing they have done during the current school year, the difficulty of their examinations, and the kinds of mental activities (e.g., memorizing facts vs. analysis or application) that their coursework requires. And students are asked to report their perceptions regarding the quality of relationships on campus and the extent to which they receive needed support from the college, as well as from family and friends.

Through additional survey items, students estimate the extent to which their experience at the college has contributed to their development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a number of areas such as acquiring a broad general education, communication, working effectively with others, and so on. They also respond to direct questions about their overall satisfaction with their educational experience at the college.