



# Engagement By Design

*Summary of 2004 Findings*



## Engagement By Design: A Call To Action

Each year, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) presents the results of its annual survey. These survey results help community colleges assess their educational practices so they can improve student outcomes in one of the most challenging and least understood sectors of American higher education.

The challenges facing community colleges include:

- ★ providing full access to education through open admissions;
- ★ serving a diverse mix of students with dramatically varying goals, from earning a degree to receiving on-the-job training;
- ★ serving students who have significant time commitments — to their families, their jobs, and their communities — in addition to their studies;
- ★ serving the students who were least well served by their previous public school education and therefore are most likely to have academic challenges;

- ★ serving disproportionately high numbers of low-income and first-generation college students; and
- ★ addressing all of these challenges while dealing with severe resource constraints.

Overcoming these hurdles — providing quality education and the necessary support to help all students meet their educational goals — is the driving force of community colleges. It is their mission. It is their job. And it is achievable.

It is true that most community college students will continue to work, commute, and have other demands competing for their time. Many will continue to feel that abandoning their education is an easier path than continuing it.

But these challenges do not make student engagement impossible. They simply indicate that student engagement is not likely to happen by accident. Engagement, therefore, must be intentional. It must happen by design.

## Reflections: Reaching for Excellence

CCSSE encourages colleges, policy-makers, and other stakeholders to ask continually whether current performance is good enough; whether the national average is good enough; and what measures of success ultimately are most appropriate, relevant, and useful.

For this reason, CCSSE offers two ways to look at data. CCSSE benchmarks — groups of conceptually related survey items that address key areas of student engagement — denote areas that educational research has shown to be important in quality educational practice. Described with a standardized mean of 50, benchmarks provide overviews of performance areas. They are useful for comparing performance across several areas within an institution and comparing institutional performance to groups of similar institutions.

Students' responses to individual survey items, presented in absolute terms, are the place to see exactly what is happening.

Together, these two measures allow colleges to gauge their performance and progress. Here, CCSSE offers five ways that colleges might reach for excellence in student engagement:

1. Use benchmarks to compare themselves to the national average (the average of participating colleges, which is 50).
2. Use benchmarks to compare themselves to high-performing colleges. A college might, for example, aspire to be at or above the 80th percentile on some or all benchmarks.
3. Measure their overall performance against results for their least-engaged group. A college might aspire to make sure all subgroups within its population (e.g., full- and part-time students; developmental students; students across all racial, ethnic, and income groups, etc.) engage in their education at similarly high levels.
4. Gauge their work in areas their college strongly values. They might focus, for example, on survey items related to service to high-risk students or on survey items related to academic rigor (e.g., are they asking students to read enough and write enough?).
5. Make the most important comparison: Where they are now, contrasted with where they want to be.

CCSSE opposes using its data to rank colleges.

## Why Student Engagement?

**Research shows that the more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter they study — the more likely they are to learn and persist toward achieving their academic goals. Student engagement, therefore, is a valuable yardstick for assessing whether, and to what extent, an institution is employing educational practices likely to produce successful results — more students across all subgroups achieving their academic goals.**

CCSSE's survey, which is grounded in research, focuses on institutional practices and student behaviors that promote student engagement. CCSSE works with participating colleges to administer the survey to their students. The colleges then receive their survey results, along with guidance and analysis they can use to improve their programs and services for students. CCSSE also makes its results public on its Web site, [www.ccsse.org](http://www.ccsse.org).

## Practicing Engagement By Design

Community college students have strong aspirations for academic and career success. Asked to name their primary goals, more than a quarter (27%) of CCSSE 2004 respondents said completing a certificate program, 59% named obtaining an associate degree, and 53% said transferring to a four-year college or university. More than a third (39%) cited obtaining or updating job-related skills as a primary goal, while 29% named changing careers.

Unfortunately, available data show a significant, persistent, unacceptable gap between student aspirations and student outcomes as measured by graduation and transfer rates.

★ **More students aspire to earn degrees than actually do.** Only one-quarter of the students who entered a public two-year institution in 1995–96 with the goal of earning a degree or certificate had attained a credential at that institution by 2001, six years later.\*

★ **More students aspire to transfer than actually do.** 53% of students cite transferring to a four-year college as a primary goal (an additional 21% name it as a secondary goal), but national data indicate that only about 25% of students actually do transfer.\*\*

These facts and CCSSE data indicate that students may too often leave community colleges before they achieve their goals. Just as important, CCSSE data indicate that many students are not certain about their future educational plans. When asked about their educational plans for subsequent terms, only 11% of CCSSE respondents said they had accomplished their goals. It is encouraging that 67% planned to return to their community colleges within 12 months, but 17% of respondents — nearly one-fifth of the students — said their educational plans were uncertain.

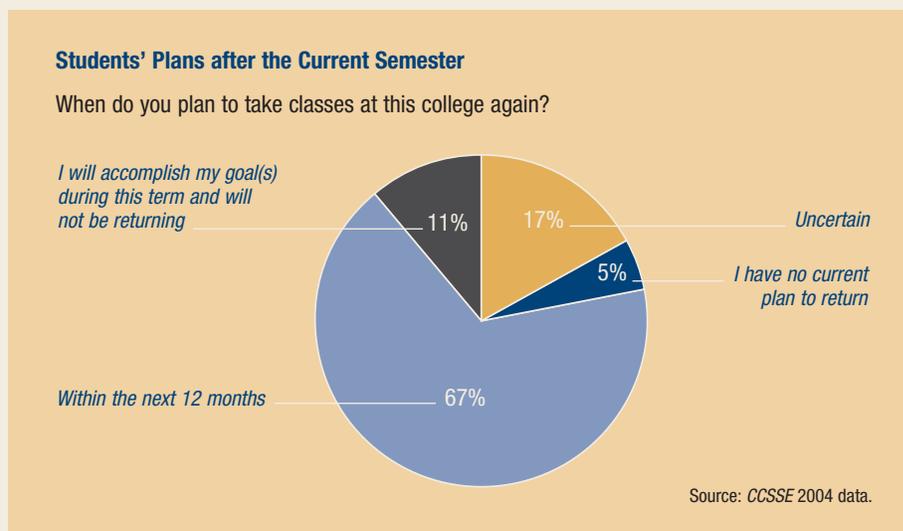
### The Role of Intentional, Inescapable Engagement

These figures identify significant percentages of community college students who are primary candidates for more effective engagement strategies.

Given community college students' multiple obligations and the consequent constraints on their time, this engagement is not likely to occur spontaneously.

Community colleges, therefore, must find ways to promote student success by making engagement inescapable. The good news is that community colleges do not have to do this work alone. Taken as a whole, CCSSE results, other community college research, and expert judgment suggest a number of strategies that can strengthen student engagement and improve student outcomes.

In addition, community colleges can learn from one another. Following are some promising engagement strategies, along with examples of student engagement, provided by colleges of all sizes, from all regions of the country.



\*American Council on Education, "Student Success: Understanding Graduation and Persistence Rates," *ACE Issue Brief*. Washington, DC: ACE Center for Policy Analysis, 2003.

\*\*National Center for Education Statistics, *Community College Transfer Rates to 4-Year Institutions Using Alternative Definitions of Transfer*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2001.

## STRATEGY 1

### Engage Early, Engage Often

Community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the beginning of the sophomore year, and data indicate that most students who leave college before achieving their goals do so early in their collegiate experience.

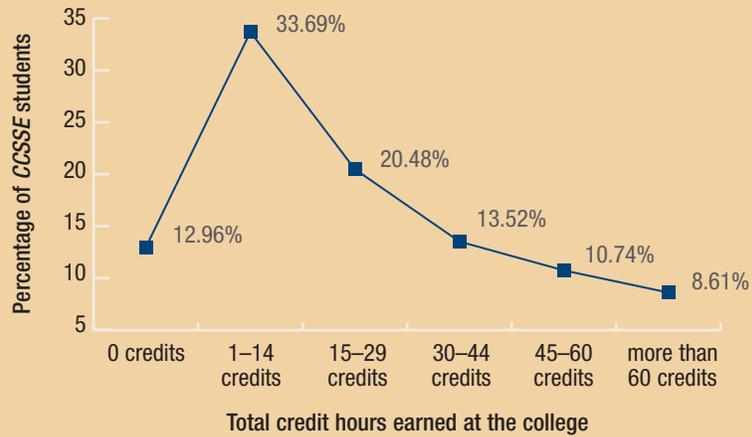
Colleges can address this precipitous loss of students by designing engagement efforts that start from the moment of students' first interactions with the college — and continue with powerful focus during their first few weeks and months as college students.

#### *Intentional Engagement Strategies*

**Sinclair Community College** (OH) increased retention rates after better marketing their learning support and financial aid services.

The Start Right program at **Valencia Community College** (FL) mandates developmental and prerequisite

### CCSSE Respondents by Credit Hours Earned at the College



*A typical semester for a full-time student is 12–15 credit hours. Sixty credits is the typical point at which students obtain an associate degree. If all students who started college completed an associate degree or the first half of a baccalaureate degree, the line between one and 60 credits would be flat.*

Source: CCSSE 2004 data.

sequences, giving students a better chance at early success. In addition, application deadlines are enforced, and students are not added to classes after the class has met just once so real work can begin on the first day.

**Tallahassee Community College** (FL) creates a positive, helpful environment at

the beginning of each term. Throughout the campus, students can stop at information tents for help finding classes or other resources. Office employees wear “Ask Me” buttons, and faculty and staff create welcome stations stocked with refreshments, maps, and other information in academic building lobbies.

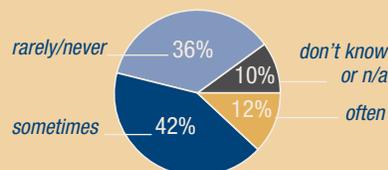
## STRATEGY 2

### Stress Academic Advising

Having a plan — a clear goal and a step-by-step strategy for attaining it — plays a critical role in students' choosing to return to school the next day, next month, and next year. There are indications from college data that the simple act of declaring a major (a form of articulating a plan) can be a key factor in student persistence.

Thus, engagement efforts that encourage students to set and meet goals — such as academic and career advising — can have a significant impact on student retention and, ultimately, student success. Certainly the 17% of students who report that they are undecided about whether they will return to college after the current semester are likely candidates for such advising.

#### Students' Use of Academic Advising/Planning Services

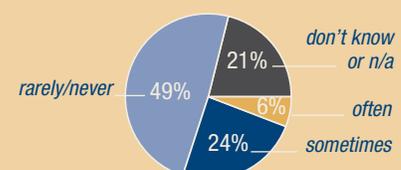


Unfortunately, more than a third (36%) of CCSSE respondents report that they rarely or never use academic advising/planning services, and nearly half (49%) report that they rarely or never use career counseling services.

#### *Intentional Engagement Strategies*

The LifeMap program at **Valencia Community College** (FL) provides developmental advising that supports student planning (for education, career, and life) and aims to strengthen self-

#### Students' Use of Career Counseling Services



confidence and decision-making skills. Developmental advising helps make students self-sufficient. Faculty and staff are students' advising partners, providing significant information and support. The expectation, however, is that as students gain experience they will increasingly take the lead in defining and implementing their educational and career goals until, ultimately, they are directing their own learning process. LifeMap includes a variety of electronic tools, including MyCareerPlanner and MyEducationPlan.

Source: CCSSE 2004 data.

**STRATEGY 3**

**Emphasize Effective Developmental Education**

Almost 50% of all first-time community college students are assessed as under-prepared for the academic demands of college-level courses, and the numbers are far higher in some settings.\* Colleges that design strategies to retain these students learn that effective remediation pays high dividends.

First and most important, students who benefit from effective developmental education will then have the opportunity to be successful in college-level studies. The reality is that without developmental education to level the playing field, they will not have that opportunity.

In addition, most students who successfully complete the prescribed remedial course sequence become productively employed: 16% as professionals; 54% in mid-level, white-collar, or technical positions; and 20% as high-skill, blue-collar workers. Only 9% remain in unskilled or low-skill jobs.\*\*

**Intentional Engagement Strategies**

**Prince George’s Community College** (MD) requires aspiring college students who lack sufficient reading, writing, and computational skills to complete the college’s developmental program. The later academic performance of those who successfully complete the developmental program is as strong as the performance of students who never needed remediation.

**The Need for Developmental Courses Is High**

Which of the following have you done, are you doing, or do you plan to do while attending this college?

Take a developmental reading course	27%
Take a developmental writing course	31%
Take a developmental math course	47%
Take developmental study skills	31%

Source: CCSSE 2004 data.

\*Roueche, J.E., and S.D. Roueche, *High Stakes, High Performance: Making Remedial Education Work*. Washington, DC: Community College Press, 1999; Grubb, W.N., *From Black Box to Pandora’s Box: Evaluating Remedial/ Developmental Education*. CCRC Brief 11. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2001.

\*\*McCabe, R.H., *No One to Waste: A Report to Public Decision Makers and Community College Leaders*. Washington, DC: Community College Press, 2000.

**STRATEGY 4**

**Redesign Educational Experiences**

Because of their competing priorities, most community college students spend little time on campus. In fact, CCSSE data indicate that overall the most successful engagement strategies currently occur in classrooms.

These data notwithstanding, however, engagement does not have to be limited to in-classroom activities. Colleges can redesign educational experiences to promote engagement both in and out of the classroom. Every interaction with students presents the potential to engage them. Community colleges can make engagement inescapable by promoting engagement through each syllabus — each assignment, each course requirement, and each mode of assessment. They can require students to work on projects with other students outside of class, require a service learning project, require students to see faculty members in their offices at least once before mid-semester, make the end-of-course assessment a group project, and so on.

**Intentional Engagement Strategies**

**Northwest Vista College** (TX) uses learning communities to engage students in multidisciplinary environments. In the Weekend College learning community, for example, two or three disciplines are combined in a team-taught, multidisciplinary atmosphere. For their final project, the students — either as a class or in smaller groups of four to five students — develop a play that incorporates what they have learned in all of the disciplines over the semester. Working together, the students write the script, direct, act, make costumes and props, design lighting and sound, and create handouts.

Ideally, engagement happens both in and outside of the classroom. To promote meaningful student-faculty interaction outside the classroom, faculty offices at **Santa Fe Community College** (FL) are in interdisciplinary units that combine private offices with comfortably furnished common areas that become sites for review sessions, informal advising, and intellectual discussions.

**Collaborative Learning among Students**

Students who often or very often worked on projects with other students during class

44%

Students who often or very often worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments

21%

0 10 20 30 40 50

**Interactions with Faculty Members**

Students who often or very often asked questions in class or participated in class discussions

63%

Students who often or very often used e-mail to communicate with an instructor

35%

Students who often or very often discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class

15%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

Source: CCSSE 2004 data.

## Reflections: Why Colleges Should Build a Culture of Evidence

The strategies outlined in this report are data-driven. They are predicated on the willingness of college administrators, faculty, and staff to build and work within a *culture of evidence*.

Better educational outcomes do not just happen. They are the result of using data wisely and of marshalling the will to be honest about current student performance in order to identify means for improving. They are the result of setting goals and implementing strategies to achieve them.

Ultimately, *every action* a college takes — in classrooms, out of classrooms, in the ways it reaches out to and communicates with students, in the way its campus is configured and used — should be designed to improve student learning. And every project, program, and practice should be evaluated on these terms as well.

This means being relentless and courageous about putting data in front of faculty and staff — and using data to focus effort and promote positive change. This is difficult work. It also, however, may be the best way to chart a course to excellence.

### How To Build a Culture of Evidence

Building a culture of evidence means providing systematic, timely, useful, and user-friendly information about student persistence, learning, and attainment. It means encouraging governing board members, administrators, faculty, staff,

and students to examine and use this data. It means regularly assessing performance in terms of student outcomes.

A key element of this work is disaggregating data. Each college should break down data by race and ethnicity, income, gender, and age to develop a genuine understanding of how different student groups are faring in the institution.

On a national basis, disaggregating data in this manner highlights an alarming difference between both college participation and attainment levels of low-income students and students of color, as compared to their more affluent and white peers. For example, 38% of white students who begin at a community college earn a degree or certificate within six years; only 26% of African American students and 29% of Hispanic students do so.\* Similar attainment gaps separate academically prepared students and those who begin their college experience in developmental courses.

Colleges and their students would be well served by becoming familiar with their own college data at this level of specificity. Then, as a standard of quality suitable to the challenge of the new century, *a college's overall performance should be considered no better than the outcomes of its lowest-achieving student group*.

\* Price, D.V., "Defining the Gaps: Access and Success at America's Community Colleges," *Keeping America's Promise*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2004.

### Intentional Engagement Strategies

Faculty members at **Lorain County Community College** (OH) review programs and plan for improvements using the Course Assessment Record Database (CARD), which focuses decisions on data. Through CARD, faculty assess course outcomes using a variety of criteria, including student learning outcomes, general educational outcomes, learning processes and activities, performance criteria, assessment techniques and analysis, and recommendations for continuous improvement. Individual faculty members' assessments of their own courses are aggregated into a program assessment. Faculty who teach the program then use that data to identify both successful strategies and specific actions that should be taken to further improve results. For example, as a result of CARD, the humanities program faculty decided to use a common essay test to establish a baseline for measuring cognitive outcomes.



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