



ENGAGING STUDENTS, CHALLENGING THE ODDS



Carolina Villamar (left) and classmate Luisa Castano.

Carolina Villamar **LaGuardia Community College (NY)**

Carolina Villamar is a 26-year-old single mother of two (a 6-year-old son and a 4-year-old daughter). She is a full-time student and works 20 hours per week babysitting.

Villamar says her college is like a home. “The teachers care for the students and help us individually. They push me to become better, to learn more.”

This level of personal attention is critical for Villamar, who spends most of her time caring for others. “I wake up at 5:30 a.m., get my kids’ breakfast and lunch, drop them off at school, and then go to class from 9:15 a.m. until 2:15 p.m. I pick up my kids and the kids I babysit at 3:15 p.m. and spend time with them until 7 p.m. Then I study until 2 a.m. Every other Saturday, my mom watches my kids and lets me rest and be alone.”

When she first started at LaGuardia, Villamar thought about quitting, but her teachers encouraged her, and she stayed. “I’m a divorced, single mother. I can and need to do this,” she says. “If I fall down, my kids are going to fall down. If I’m standing, they will be there, right beside me.”

Each year, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*) presents the results of its annual survey. These results give community colleges objective and relevant data about students’ experiences at their colleges so they can better understand how effectively they are engaging their students and identify areas for improvement. This 2005 report reflects responses from 133,281 students from 257 colleges in 38 states.

This year, the *CCSSE* report, *Engaging Students, Challenging the Odds*, also includes results of the first administration of the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (*CCFSSE*), which provides insights into faculty perceptions and practices. Because many items on *CCSSE* and *CCFSSE* are aligned, the report includes side-by-side views of faculty members’ and students’ responses.

As the results of both surveys demonstrate, using data to assess the student experience provides powerful, and sometimes surprising, results. After all, our personal data — each person’s observations and individual experiences — provide anecdotal information that does not necessarily reflect the experience of all, or even most, students. Only systematically collected data can help us understand the typical student experience, and that understanding is essential for any institution seeking improvement in student learning, persistence, and completion of academic goals.

Students Who Challenge the Odds

This year's *CCSSE* report gives a voice to community college students, particularly those who have to overcome the greatest odds to complete their education. There are consistent, unacceptable gaps between outcomes for high-risk students and their peers. To better understand these gaps — and, even more important, to give colleges tools to address them — *CCSSE* has looked at findings for academically underprepared students, students of color, first-generation students, adult learners, and part-time students.

The 2005 *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-age learners — are more engaged in their college experience than their peers. For example, they are less likely to come to class unprepared, they interact more frequently with instructors outside the classroom, and they use support services more often. On the other hand, many of these students have lower aspirations and — especially in the case of academically underprepared students, students of color, and low-income students — show less successful outcomes in terms of lower grades and lower persistence rates. In other words, they are working harder, but achieving lower results.

At first glance, these findings may be unexpected. After all, a large and growing body of evidence shows a positive correlation between student engagement and student outcomes.

But a closer look suggests that the *CCSSE* data are more provocative than surprising. Consider these points:

1. Only about one-half of community college students return to college for their second year of study, and far too many leave before completing their first semester. High-risk students, moreover, drop out at a higher rate than their peers. Underprepared students (those who require developmental education), for example, are more likely to drop out in the first semester and less likely to return for their second semester. Drop-out rates, moreover, grow in proportion to the number of developmental courses the students need.
2. It is very likely that for some high-risk students, even the most engaging educational experience will not be powerful enough to offset the combination of financial, academic, personal, and work-related challenges they face.
3. Given the positive, well-documented relationship between engagement and outcomes, we might speculate that among high-risk students, the most engaged are more likely, in general, to stay in college, whereas the least engaged are more likely to be among those who drop out in the first semester. If this is the case, the *CCSSE* results reflect the views of the generally more engaged high-risk students. Alternatively, we might speculate that high-risk students are less prepared for college and therefore must be more engaged to persist in their studies — and to achieve goals that lower-risk students can reach with less effort and engagement.

Why Student Engagement Matters

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 to stay in college until they achieve their academic goals.* Student engagement, therefore, is a valuable yardstick for assessing whether, and to what extent, an institution's educational practices are likely to produce successful results — more students across all groups learning at higher levels and achieving their academic goals.

A growing body of research has identified institutional practices and student behaviors that promote student engagement, and the *CCSSE* survey focuses on these elements of students' experiences. *CCSSE* works with participating colleges to administer the survey, which measures students' levels of engagement in a variety of areas. The colleges then receive their survey results, along with guidance and analysis they can use to improve their programs and services for students.

*Kuh, G.D., The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual Framework and Overview of Psychometric Properties. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning, 2001.

Pascarella, E., and P. Terenzini, How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Whether these speculations are accurate is an issue for continuing study and analysis.

The inescapable conclusion from the data, however, is that where there are differences in engagement levels between low- and high-risk students, the community college students we normally describe as high-risk generally are more engaged than their peers. This point has significant implications for community colleges and their students. These results provide insight into how community colleges can help more students — high-risk, low-risk, and everyone in between — stick with their studies until they achieve their educational goals.



A Closer Look at High-Risk Students

It is impossible to get a clear picture of engagement for all students without comparing engagement and outcomes for various student groups, particularly high-risk student groups. This type of analysis is critical for community colleges that want to improve outcomes for those who bring the greatest challenges to college with them — and who stand to gain the most from their community college experience.

Students are considered high risk if they exhibit several factors that are shown to jeopardize educational persistence and attainment. Students attending community colleges are three to four times more likely than their counterparts in four-year colleges and universities to reflect four or more of the key risk factors. The risk factors are:

- ★ being academically underprepared for college-level work;
- ★ not entering college directly after high school;
- ★ attending college part-time;
- ★ being a single parent;
- ★ being financially independent (i.e., students who rely on their own income or savings and whose parents are not sources of income for meeting college costs);
- ★ caring for children at home;
- ★ working more than 30 hours per week; and
- ★ being a first-generation college student.

The analyses reported here show intriguing patterns of engagement for selected groups of at-risk students. It is important to note, however, that although this report considers the risk factors one at a time, students often experience them in combinations, which multiplies the students' risks of not achieving their educational goals. Finally, additional insight into these findings will be gained from further study, including the use of statistical controls.

Academically Underprepared Students: Investments with High Dividends

More than half (53%) of *CCSSE* respondents report that they have taken or plan to take a developmental math, reading, or writing course, which indicates that they are not academically prepared for college-level work. By several measures, these students are more engaged with their education than their academically prepared peers. Academically underprepared students are more likely to:

- ★ **Talk about career plans with an instructor or advisor** often or very often (27% vs. 21% of academically prepared students).
- ★ **Work harder than they thought they could** to meet an instructor's expectations often or very often (53% vs. 43% of academically prepared students).
- ★ **Write more papers or reports** (29% vs. 23% of academically prepared students report writing 11 or more papers during the school year).

In addition, academically underprepared students more frequently report that

their colleges help them develop the skills and abilities they need to succeed, including writing more clearly and effectively, speaking more clearly and effectively, thinking critically and analytically, and solving numerical problems.

Reflections on Results

These results indicate that academically underprepared students are connecting with their colleges in ways that may help compensate for the gaps in their previous educational experiences.

Colleges that design strategies to retain these students find that effective remediation pays high dividends. Students who benefit from effective developmental education have the opportunity to be successful in subsequent college-level studies — an opportunity that would not exist without developmental education. In addition, at its best, developmental education levels the playing field so that students who begin in developmental courses have at least the same chances of completing a degree or transferring as their peers who began their studies in college-level courses.*

Students of Color: The Women and the Men

A comparison of students of color (black, Hispanic, and Native American students) and white students shows little difference in engagement on survey items related to active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, or student effort. Students of color, however, report more academic gain in several areas during their college experience and were more likely to credit their college for helping them achieve that gain.

*Roueche, J.E., E. Ely, and S.D. Roueche, In Pursuit of Excellence. Washington, DC: Community College Press, 2001.

The crisis in black men's educational success — in terms of the relatively low numbers of black men who enroll in and complete college — is well documented. The *CCSSE* data reveal intriguing engagement differences for black men, who, although increasingly underrepresented among the ranks of college students, are more engaged in several areas than either black women or students who are not black. For example, black men are more likely to:

- ★ **Work with instructors on activities other than coursework** often or very often (14% of black men vs. 10% of black women).
- ★ **Participate in college-sponsored activities** (28% of black men vs. 16% of black women report spending between one and 20 hours per week on these activities).

Black men also are more engaged than nonblack students in these areas.

In addition, black men are more likely than either black women or nonblack students to report that their college helps them cope with nonacademic responsibilities and provides the support they need to thrive socially.

Black women, however, are more engaged than black men in several areas. Black women are more likely to:

- ★ **Discuss ideas from readings or classes** with others outside of class often or very often (57% of black women vs. 45% of black men).
- ★ **Use the Internet or instant messaging** to work on an assignment often or very often (60% of black women vs. 52% of black men).

- ★ **Have plans to continue their studies** (when asked when they plan to take classes at their college again, 24% of black women vs. 31% of black men had no plan to return to their college or were uncertain about their future plans).

Black women are more likely to spend 30 hours or more per week caring for dependents (42% of black women vs. 18% of black men) and to spend slightly more time working for pay.

Black women also spend more time caring for dependents and working — and are more engaged in the areas described above — than nonblack students.

Reflections on Results

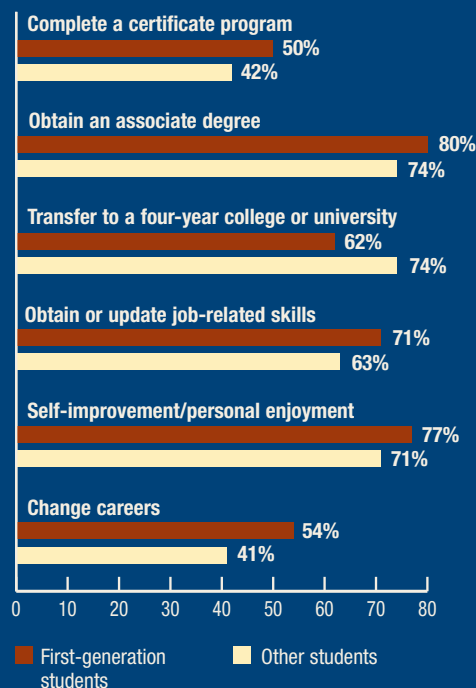
Worthy of note is the distinction between the forms of engagement for black women and black men. The women's experiences appear to be more academically oriented, whereas the men's connections emphasize out-of-class and social activities. While black women's time spent caring for family and working may partially explain why they are not involved in more on-campus activities, additional research would be needed to explore the reasons for the differences between black women and men.

In the meantime, community colleges may do well to build on black men's out-of-class interests, connect those interests to the classroom, and engage them more effectively in the earliest weeks of their college experience to increase the numbers of black men who persist and succeed.

First-Generation Students: An Opportunity To Raise Aspirations

More than one-third (37%) of 2005 *CCSSE* respondents are first-generation students — students whose parents had no college experience. When compared with students who had at least one parent who attended college, first-generation students spend comparable hours working and preparing for class. They spend significantly more time, however, caring for dependents (33% of first-generation students vs. 22% of other students spend more than 30 hours a week caring for dependents). They are significantly less likely to aspire to transfer to a four-year college or university, and they are more likely to aspire to earn an associate degree or certificate and improve job skills.

First Generation Students' Goals (Primary or Secondary)



Source: *CCSSE* 2005 data.

First-generation students, however, are more likely than their peers to:

- ★ **Come to class prepared** (36% of first-generation students vs. 28% of other students say they never come to class unprepared).
- ★ **Attend class** (58% of first-generation students vs. 44% of other students say they never skip class).

Reflections on Results

There is not a notable difference between first-generation students' and other students' use of career counseling, but overall use of this service is low. Engagement strategies that encourage students to set and pursue goals, such as academic and career advising, can positively affect student retention and, ultimately, student success. These services also can serve to increase students' aspirations. Colleges that seek to improve outcomes for first-generation students might consider making academic and career counseling mandatory or building these services into classroom activities so that they become inescapable elements of students' college experience.

Students 25 and Older: More Focus and Engagement, Particularly for Women

More than one-third (37%) of CCSSE respondents are over age 24, and there are dramatic engagement differences between these nontraditional-age students and their traditional-age (18- to 24-year-old) peers. Nontraditional-age

students are more likely to ask questions in class and contribute to class discussions, attend class, and come to class prepared. They also report more favorable relationships with both instructors and administrative personnel.

Results for one particular group of nontraditional-age learners — women who are 25 and older — are noteworthy. Almost a quarter (23%) of CCSSE respondents are nontraditional-age women, and their survey responses reflect the differences for all nontraditional-age students. In addition, nontraditional-age women are significantly more likely than other students to report that their college experience helped them “quite a bit” or “very much” to think critically and analytically (72% vs. 64%), acquire job or work-related skills (57% vs. 48%), and learn more effectively on their own (74% vs. 66%).

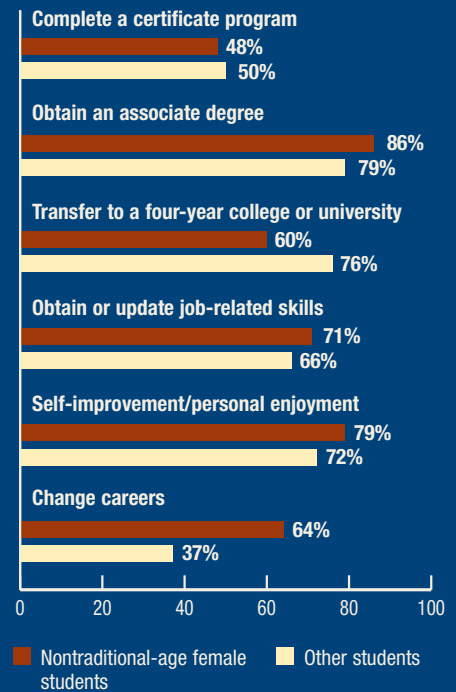
Nontraditional-age women also are more likely to have plans to return to college the following semester (17% of nontraditional-age women vs. 25% of other students say they have no plan to return to college the next semester or are uncertain of their plans), a key indicator for retention.

But nontraditional-age women are significantly less likely to aspire to transfer to a four-year college or university, and they are more likely to state changing careers as a goal.

Reflections on Results

With age comes focus. Students who are 25 and older — women in particular — appear to have more clearly defined goals and better-developed study habits than

Nontraditional-Age Female Students' Goals (Primary or Secondary)



Source: CCSSE 2005 data.

their peers. They tend to spend more time on task and to be more active in classrooms — characteristics that add to their value as peer mentors and members of study groups or project teams.

These nontraditional-age women students, however, would benefit from services that seek to raise their aspirations so they get more out of the intensive effort they devote to their studies. Other students might benefit from engagement strategies such as academic advising and skill labs that would instill the focus and goals that nontraditional-age female students bring to their college experience. As with all engagement efforts, more community college students are likely to benefit from these strategies if they are, at least in part, integrated into course design.

Note: This analysis of nontraditional-age women and other students excludes students who already hold an associate degree or higher (10% of the 2005 survey respondents) to focus the findings on students working toward a degree or certificate.

CCFSSE: A First Look

In the Eye of the Beholder

The Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), which is aligned with CCSSE, elicits information from faculty about their teaching practices, the ways they spend their professional time both in and out of class, and their perceptions regarding students' educational experiences. In 2005, 3,561 faculty members from 39 colleges participated in the first administration of the survey.

It is important to note that there are differences in the student and faculty surveys — for example, students report their experiences throughout the current academic year, while faculty members are

asked to describe their practices in a specific, selected course. The student and faculty responses nonetheless provide a useful prompt for discussion, particularly where faculty and students have differing perceptions.

Overall, faculty members perceive higher levels of student engagement than students report. For example, with regard to active and collaborative learning items, faculty members report that students are asking more questions in class, collaborating more with others, and working on community-based projects more than students report doing any of these activities. Faculty also consistently report higher levels of student-faculty interaction, including more frequent conversations about coursework and career plans.

The divergence between student and faculty views is not unexpected. In part, it shows the difference between personal and systematically collected data. For example, an instructor might talk with five or six students after each class and personally experience a high level of student-faculty interaction. But if generally it is *the same* five or six students that linger after each class, then the instructor is interacting with only a fraction of his or her students.

CCFSSE data are based on results from 39 colleges. When student (CCSSE) and faculty (CCFSSE) views are presented side-by-side in this report, the student responses include data only from colleges that participated in the faculty survey.

Making the Most of All Faculty Members' Time

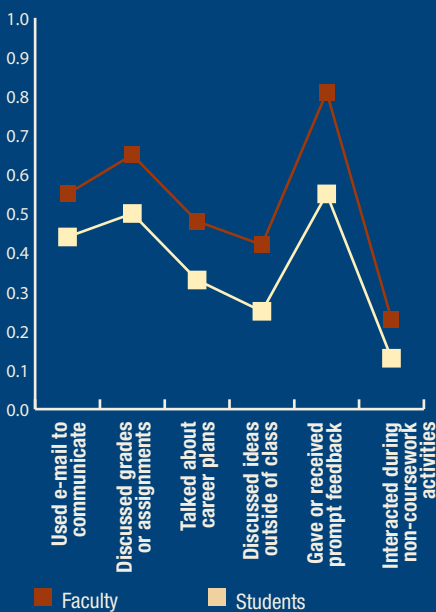
Given the number of both part-time students and part-time instructors, opportunities for engagement occur primarily in the classroom. CCFSSE responses show that:

- ★ 75% of full-time faculty and 9% of part-time faculty consider academic advising part of their teaching role.
- ★ 80% of part-time faculty and 47% of full-time faculty spend zero hours per week working with students on activities other than coursework.
- ★ Only 12% of part-time faculty and 23% of full-time faculty often incorporate academic advising into their courses.

Reflections on Results

Academic advising and career counseling — engagement efforts that encourage students to set and meet goals — can significantly affect student retention and success. Although 89% of CCSSE student respondents cite academic advising/planning as important, 35% report that they rarely or never use these services. Half of students (50%) say they rarely or never use career counseling services. Instructors who build these activities into their class requirements, therefore, have the potential to reach students who otherwise would not get this counseling.

**Student-Faculty Interaction:
Students' Experiences/Faculty Perceptions**



Source: CCSSE 2005 data.

Note: To create this chart of student and faculty views, responses to CCSSE and CCFSSE items were rescaled. All scores were converted to proportions of their totals so that the low end of the scale was always zero and the high end was always one. For example, a four on a seven-point scale and a three on a five-point scale both equal 0.5. Don't Know/Not Applicable responses on items measuring frequency of use were not included in the computation of these scores.

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